

Barry MacSweeney's North East:

**A Study of the Rural and the Urban
in his
Published and Unpublished Poetry**

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Abstract

The rural and the urban North East constitute fundamental and enduring elements of Barry MacSweeney's poetic, connecting his oeuvre from the earliest to the last of his compositions. Both have received frequent and passing attention from critics, but this is the first sustained examination to draw extensively on the recently acquired Barry MacSweeney Archive at the University of Newcastle upon Tyne.

The first part deals with MacSweeney's rural North East, demythologising his complex literary relationship with the poet Basil Bunting; examining the construction of his 'Sparty Lea locale'; exploring his wider North East region and assessing the complex signification of 'North' and Northern identity within his work. The second part focuses on the poet's urban North East and attempts to redress the underdeveloped status of his native Newcastle in criticism of his work. It examines the literary precursors which enabled MacSweeney to realise his poetic city; unravels the imagistic evolution of Newcastle as an entity within his published and manuscript poems; and explores the private concerns which made it a truly individual construct.

MacSweeney's poetic North East is shown to be a place of solitary refuge but also of community: one infused with passion, restlessness, social indignation and a notion of identity fragmented by geographical tensions. Above all this thesis demonstrates the centrality of the landscapes which MacSweeney deemed fundamental to himself and to the nature of his region; his willingness to respond to these evolving topographies; and his constant endeavours to inscribe and understand his own interaction with them through the metamorphosing forms of his poetry.

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List of Abbreviations

Texts by Barry MacSweeney:

<i>Boulevard:</i>	<i>Our Mutual Scarlet Boulevard</i> (London: Fulcrum Press, 1971)
<i>Demons</i>	<i>The Book of Demons</i> (Newcastle upon Tyne: Bloodaxe Books, 1997)
<i>Horses</i>	<i>Horses in Boiling Blood</i> (Cambridge: Equipage, 2004)
<i>Memos</i>	<i>Hellhound Memos</i> (London: The Many Press, 1993)
<i>Postcards</i>	<i>Postcards from Hitler</i> (London: Writers Forum, 1998)
<i>Tempers</i>	<i>The Tempers of Hazard, Re/Active Anthology 3</i> (London: Paladin, 1993)
<i>The Boy</i>	<i>The Boy From The Green Cabaret Tells of His Mother</i> (London: Hutchinson, 1968)
<i>Viareggio</i>	<i>Flames on the Beach at Viareggio</i> (Barnet: Blacksuede Boot Press, 1970)

Archive Material:

Archive: BM: 1/...	Material from the ‘published’ Barry MacSweeney Papers, Robinson Library Special Collections, University of Newcastle upon Tyne.
Archive: BM: 2/...	Material from the ‘unpublished’ Barry MacSweeney Papers, Robinson Library Special Collections, University of Newcastle upon Tyne.
‘Mary Bell Sonnets’/ ‘Mary Bell’	‘Blood Money: The Marvellous Secret Sonnets of Mary Bell: Child’ Killer’, BM: Archive: 2/9/1.

Secondary Texts:

‘Parts in the Weal’	Clive Bush, ‘Parts in the Weal of Kynde’ in <i>Out of Dissent: A Study of Five Contemporary British Poets</i> (London: Talus, 1997), pp. 304-416
<i>Poetry Information</i>	Mottram, Eric., ‘MacSweeney/Pickard/Smith: Poets from North East England interviewed by Eric Mottram’, <i>Poetry Information</i> Number 18 (Winter/Spring 1977-78) 21-39
‘Radical Landscapes’	Harriet Tarlo, ‘Radical Landscapes: Contemporary Poetry in the Bunting Tradition’, <i>The Star You Steer By: Basil Bunting and British Modernism</i> , ed., James McGonigal & Richard Price (Amsterdam/Atlanta: Rodopi, 2000) pp. 149-180

Introduction

This is down to being born
 in Bromley or Benwell – those
 primary landscapes
 are used by each as cornerstone
 references in expanding ratio
 lateral to growing older, into
 time;
 but of course it is not
 that easy¹

In this late archive fragment of his work Barry MacSweeney self-reflexively contemplates the fundamental relationship between a poet, his art and his indigenous landscape, and in doing so provides a fitting summary for his own literary arc. For in the work of this definitively North Eastern, but also fiercely international poet, place, and particularly what he terms ‘primary’ or native ‘landscapes’ are a hugely significant and intensely emotional concern. MacSweeney’s interest in this theme can be gleaned from the loco-descriptive literary traditions in which he persistently inscribed himself, referencing Bunting and Clare, O’Hara and Baudelaire, and in the way he repeatedly conjoined notions of place and identity in constructs such as ‘Martin’s Haydon Bridge’² and ‘in the brightest Northumberland sunlight / loved by Gran, Hotspur and Eric Mottram’.³ The poet’s preoccupation with referencing his primarily North East locative heritage (‘i come from the Chillingham Bull’);⁴ his regard for regionality as essential to the shaping of character and the very nature of peoples (the specificity of his realm is stressed in a version of *Ranter* which states: ‘Ranter writing: Thank God I’m not a Yorkshireman / always

¹ Archive: BM: 2/3, uncollected fragment. The reason for ‘Bromley’ is unclear as this is not MacSweeney’s father’s native area of London, Bromley’s most famous native being H.G. Wells.

² *Blackbird*, (Durham: Pig Press, 1980). Hereafter referred to as *Blackbird*.

³ ‘Lazy Susan’s Blockbusters’, Archive: BM: 1/19/3.

⁴ ‘Saffron Walden Blues, at the Pond House’ [4], *Boulevard*, p. 41.

on the cadge’)⁵ and his use of geographical indices to characterise friends, relations, lovers, enemies, rivals and inspirations alike, were themes that spanned the whole of his work, from: ‘Ovingham, / light-handed Bewick’⁶ to ‘Come on Annie, you’re just a Geordie a million miles from home!’⁷ Yet his powerful attachment to the North East can best be understood through the depth of feeling which he crammed into its representation in his poems: emotions which are manifest in his reactions to the landscapes themselves⁸ and in his ability to infuse even the most unpromising vista with a lyrical beauty which echoed his enduring, if often derivatively couched, sentiment towards it:

when light hits Newcastle
 & the village swarms:
 goes
 veering
 a la Russe, shining
 silver lathes among striped
 awnings.⁹

This thesis recognises and maps MacSweeney’s use of his ‘primary landscapes [...] as cornerstone / references in expanding ratio / lateral to growing older, into / time’, assuming as its theme the evolving realisation of the North East in his work and his attempts to relate his own identity to its topography and culture. It separates this substantial subject into two Parts which address the rural and the urban North East in his work: a partition which reflects both traditional literary distinctions and the broad thematic divisions in MacSweeney’s oeuvre. It then considers each realm in succession in order to underline the unique and yet interactive qualities of the landscapes in a mode that reflects MacSweeney’s own conception of them: a

⁵ Archive: BM: 1/14/4.

⁶ ‘Map, etcetera’, *Boulevard*, p. 24.

⁷ ‘Letter to Hollywood’, Archive: BM: 2/10/1 (dated 1998).

⁸ ‘I am so glad to live at the / northern end of the earth!’, ‘The Forever Lost Parliament of Barry and Jacqueline’, *Demons*, p. 65.

⁹ ‘Black Spur’ [2], Archive: BM: 2/2.

notion inherent in the perceptual duality of an ‘uncollected’ fragment in which he considers the relationship between these two spheres and the relative merits and difficulties of each:

Here in the city there is also
 community, Gateshead back to backs –
 whereas on the fells, the poet
 [...]

 he walks
 [...]

 the hills with his own dreams, he
 talks with the land – but what
 does not enter is the local
 community mistrust, the moral
 outrage of the village of Allendale.¹⁰

Taking as a base this balanced, comparative structure, each Part is then divided into three chapters sequentially founded on the themes of literary influence, imagistic representation and personal signification, all of which approach MacSweeney’s North East landscapes from a slightly different critical perspective. In Part One the first chapter focuses on the frequently misconstrued impact upon MacSweeney’s rural poetry of one major regional progenitor; the second chapter explores the poetic minutiae of a specific rural locale and examines the poet’s self-inscription within this landscape; and the third chapter concerns itself with geographical juxtaposition and the poet’s northern identity as articulated through his native and non-native spheres. In Part Two the first chapter examines both the domestic and international literary influences which helped to shape MacSweeney’s depictions of Newcastle; the second chapter addresses his literary depiction of the city’s cultural and infrastructural upheavals in the

¹⁰ Archive: BM: 2/3. A rather hazy monologue, this fragment nonetheless captures the fluid notions of liberty and restriction which MacSweeney associated with each realm as well as addressing the dangers of romanticising either landscape: But we must be / careful here, because the outdoor / lavatories and thin back streets, can / easily be celebrated for what / they are not – a recommended / lifestyle – it is also the poet / railing against the sordidly produced / and architectural corruption of the / city’.

second half of the twentieth century; and the third examines the ways in which his emotional trajectory came to bear upon his evolving vision of his native metropolis.

Chapter One asks whether Basil Bunting was indeed ‘a key figure in [MacSweeney’s] literary universe?’ adopting as its premise the cyclic critical correlation between the two and questioning the validity of this connection as regards the assessment of MacSweeney’s rural landscapes on the grounds that it has become little more than a misleading prerequisite which masks the reality of their relationship.¹¹ By first examining the professional and biographical factors (their journalistic professions and involvement in the 1960s North East poetry scene) which reinforced this bond, this chapter observes how such issues have been projected onto a notion of mentorship and influence. The dialogue covers MacSweeney’s own rendition of the inspiration: at once dismissive of his elder (‘Worn / away with staring at Venus, / he licks his fat, the slumber / of basil’)¹² and yet wont to self-consciously reference him in his poems: ‘On the little wings of the snow bunting not yet left / The Kielder Ride’.¹³ Noting the existence of some similarities in these poets’ depictions of Northumbrian landscapes, this chapter refutes the assumption that the Bunting precedent applies to over thirty-five years of MacSweeney’s work. It argues that relatively little of either poets’ verse outside *Briggflatts* and *Pearl* deals explicitly with the rural North East, and that the majority of parallels between these sequences are founded not on formal poetics but on political and humanist ideologies and their common use of a topographical resource. The chapter avers that this habitual regional-historical realm of association is more indicative of their personal and generational distinctiveness than it is of their poetic similitude. It concludes that the affiliation remains both complex and inescapable, for although MacSweeney’s rendition of his Northumbrian landscapes arose largely as a result of his own situation and experiences, Bunting’s ghost never quite disappears from his work.

¹¹ John Sears, ‘Out of Control’, www.popmatters.com/books/reviews/w/wolf-tongue.shtml [accessed 10 August 2007]

¹² *Fools Gold* (Sidcup: Blacksuede Boot Press, 1972), p. 4. Hereafter referred to as *Fools Gold*.

¹³ ‘Troubled Are These Times’, *Horses*, p. 11.

Chapter Two posits the existence in MacSweeney's work of an area identifiable as his 'Sparty Lea locale', one characterised by certain crucial lexicons (the peewit, tumblestones, cressbeds etc) and exemplified in *Pearl* but not constrained within it, being traceable as a growing concern in preceding poems and as an evolving one after that. The dialogue opens with an account of the poet's meticulous, accumulative mapping of this arena; its shifting presence within his oeuvre; the intensity of its depiction and the reasons for its containment. Exploring his use and selection of the locale's signifiers and their presence as leitmotifs in his work, it proceeds to consider MacSweeney's personal historicising of the landscape: his tendency to conceive it in relation to private incidents whilst inferring the existence of a profound synthesis between place and event, and his renditions of community, family and love against its influential backcloth. The chapter touches on *Pearl*'s relation to its medieval literary counterpart; the sequence's debt to the work of Clare and MacSweeney's synthesis of its eponymous character with the scene she inhabits. Considering the poet's use of the locale as a refuge from private traumas, the discussion examines his creation of Sparty as an arena in which he was empowered by anti-establishment precedents ('William Blake [...] in his black and white [...] by the East Allen ')¹⁴ and as a place whose obscurity rendered him its unchallenged narrator. The analysis proceeds to show how Sparty existed in his work as both a platform and context for creative composition: as an alternative sphere, or 'other' place which informed the diverse topographies of his poems, and yet also operated as a base from which to generate, discover and unfurl his concerns about himself and the world.

Chapter Three spotlights MacSweeney's 'other' rural North East: those landscapes in his work often overlooked as a result of the critical emphasis on his 'Sparty Lea locale' which nonetheless constitute recurrent concerns, including the region's coast from South Shields to Lindisfarne and Berwick; those inland districts of Northumberland comprising the Cheviots,

¹⁴ 'In Pueblo Colorado', Archive: BM: 2/7.

Coquet Valley and Kielder Reservoir and the post-industrial topographies of County Durham. Approaching MacSweeney's 'North' as an unfixed and subjective entity, its nature dependent on his experiences, cerebral associations and uneven familiarity with the terrain, this section examines his reverential attitude towards such resonant symbols as Lindisfarne, the North Sea and the Cheviots and his tendency to cast these, his North East realm and its luminescent meteorology and seasons, as powerful enigmatic entities. The discourse explicates the poet's historical rendering of the region; the primitive, sexualised masculinity of his landscapes and the potential for elemental escape which they proffer, and yet it also considers their somewhat incongruous relation to the human topographies of Frank O'Hara. Subsequently, the chapter proceeds to observe the poet's proudly antagonistic sense of 'North' and northern character and his concept of his native dialect as the ultimate signifier for the region's difference from the 'South'. I note the way in which his adoption of marginalised precedents in the form of Russian and contemporary American verse allied his loco-descriptive poetic with that of other 'regional' writers, and how this enabled him to achieve his distinct sense of place. Yet this chapter also reveals how the affirmative iconographic use of 'North' in MacSweeney's work is closely underpinned by a concurrent fixation with mapping, separation, travel and distance which mirrors both the still unfixed identity of the region itself and the poet's simultaneous struggle with concepts of heredity, belonging and the search for a true sense of self.

The second Part of this thesis focuses on MacSweeney's urban North East and looks at the inveterate presence of Newcastle upon Tyne within his work. By first establishing that the poet's native city emerges in a series of different guises throughout three decades of his verse, it argues that these urban metamorphoses are crucially reliant on three significant factors. The first of these was his inevitable stylistic maturation, the second the turbulent transformations in the physical and cultural infrastructure of the city itself, and the third his own emotional trajectory. This triumvirate of separately evolving concerns, whose fluidity ensures that their

interrelation, MacSweeney's 'Newcastle' and his relationship with it are constantly changing entities, are then each addressed in successive chapters. Chapter Four looks at influence and traces the plethora of literary precursors who shaped MacSweeney's poetic responses to the city. Examining what has sometimes been regarded as his over-reliance on early progenitors as well as the difficulties he encountered as a result of his immense diversity, it contrasts his early portraits of 'Newcastle' with those of his compatriot Tom Pickard and looks at the ways in which he attempted to dislocate himself from his provincial origins by embracing radical and international forms. The chapter considers his rejection of the literary mainstream and the epiphany he underwent on encountering Olson's 'projective verse' which caused him to re-evaluate his poetic responses to the city. Exploring the radical impulses which subjugated Newcastle's presence in his mid-point work and those local influences and nineteenth century exemplars which contributed to its re-emergence in *Ranter* and *Memos*, the discourse then contemplates the city's function as the urban 'other' to MacSweeney's rural idyll of Sparty Lea and examines his city poetry's stylistic indebtedness to his journalistic profession.¹⁵ The chapter concludes by gauging the influence of Apollinaire on MacSweeney's final renditions of Newcastle, as he celebrated his city in the munificent style of his progenitor's Paris.

Chapter Five examines the imagistic progressions which define MacSweeney's career-spanning representation of Newcastle's shifting vistas in both his published and unpublished work: often divergent corpuses whose concurrent examination is crucial to understanding the development of his creative responses to the city. Demarcating the distinct reference patterns which exist within each body of work and the manner in which these interact with each other, this discourse addresses the poet's architectural and historical rendition of the city; his use of documentary sources and his treatment of the ultimate symbol of Newcastle's longevity: the iconographic River Tyne. I proceed to examine his triumphant versification of the region's

¹⁵ *Ranter* (Nottingham: Slow Dancer Press, 1985). Hereafter referred to as *Ranter*.

past experiences in *Black Torch* and his use of images conjuring 1960s working-class Geordie culture: the evocative milieu of his youth. Yet this dialogue also tracks the poet's powerful concern with the limitations of such durable themes: his realisation of a cityscape defined less by its architecture and resonant symbols than by its structural despoliation, and the manner in which he frequently eschewed the too obvious depiction of such physical changes in favour of lambasting those responsible and emphasising the debilitating effects of such actions on the city's populace. Here, I argue for MacSweeney's social responsiveness, examining his ability to entrench himself within the life of the city and articulate its needs from a compassionate, yet un-romantic point of view. I explore the multifaceted signification of Gallowgate in his later work; the unremittingly dark and dissolute landscapes of the largely unpublished 'Mary Bell Sonnets', and his discerning anticipation of the cultural upheavals which were to affect the city in the late 1990s. Lastly, this chapter considers the poetic renaissance which the city underwent in *Horses*, where Newcastle is rendered, with a substantial dose of wry Geordie humour, as a unique locale open to its past, present and future, and as one which can finally be celebrated for what it is, rather than through the lexicons of what has been lost.

Chapter Six concludes this study of MacSweeney's often private topographical poetic by examining the extent to which his 'Newcastle' as a metamorphosing construct within his oeuvre was driven by a highly personal, biographically shaped vision of a city with which he felt an innate but complex connection. Exploring the individualising impetuses: his attitude towards his Geordie identity; his adolescent reaction to the town's insularity; his conception of relationships conducted against the urban backdrop; his versification of his native dialect and other such concerns, it shows how each became a factor in which aspects of the city he portrayed and which he ignored. The chapter contemplates the enduring tensions which rive MacSweeney's depictions of Newcastle, unearthing their biographical foundations, exploring his struggle with, what were for him, interlocked notions of violence and 'home', and looking

at the impact on his cityscapes of his use of Newcastle as a bolt-hole in which to indulge his addiction. Studying the poet's urban affiliations: those incarnate in his use of local images and locations as private simile and those inveterate motifs which allied his poetic identity with that of the wider collective and established him as a collusive Geordie, it considers his passion for Newcastle's football team and his instinctive defence of the city's blue-collar populace. In conclusion, it assesses the strength of those cerebral affiliations which not only contributed to the manifestation of Newcastle as a unique phenomenon in his verse but which enabled it to operate as a symbol for his identity and as an emotional-psychological core against which he measured all other locations in his consciousness and in his work.

The collective discursive territory which these chapters inhabit enables them to reflect on and relate to each other in a manner befitting the tensions and interactions of their subject matters, yet it also meant that difficult decisions needed to be made regarding the situating of materials and discussions in particular chapters when they were justifiably relevant to several. A major instance was where to include a consideration of the Bunting-Pickard-MacSweeney triumvirate, an often misinterpreted dialectic with widespread implications for MacSweeney's poetic which I eventually placed in Chapter One in order for it to inform the later discussions. Equally, I considered it imperative to place my interpretation of the Bunting influence as the first chapter of this study so that any later reference to the link might be assessed in its light. MacSweeney's highly complex relation to a vast array of literary progenitors also necessitated a discriminating approach to his verse, and I chose to consider only those whose influence can be seen in his poetry in direct relation to my loco-descriptive themes. This practice limited my analysis of Prynne, a poet often thought crucial to MacSweeney's work and yet to whom large tracts of his poetry bear little relation. That MacSweeney cherished the comradeship of this man with whom he 'hit it off'; that he sought and valued his opinion, is uncontested.¹⁶

¹⁶ *Poetry Information*, p. 23.

Yet Prynne's impact on MacSweeney's North East landscape work is negligible, and where I include him in my discussion it is either in relation to their friendship or on the few occasions where I deem there to be evidence of actual influence. I have also restricted my examination of MacSweeney's relation to another of his frequently alleged antecedents, Manley Hopkins. In part this is because Hopkins' mainstream popularity would have been anathema to the poet (a supposition borne out by his work's absence from MacSweeney's personal library) but also because the similarities in their use of language are largely undermined by the dependence of MacSweeney's verse on a fluidity (irrespective of his challenging linguistics) which Hopkins' work appears to consciously resist.

The origins of this thesis lie in research undertaken between 2001 and 2003 toward my MLitt degree into the work of 'North East' poets Basil Bunting and Tony Harrison, and in my concurrent involvement in a project which required me to make extensive use of the Bunting Archive at Durham University and to transcribe many of that poet's recordings: skills which I was able to apply to my analysis of the MacSweeney Papers.¹⁷ My knowledge of these poets' work provided a framework by which I was able to assess the emotionally charged landscapes and geographical tensions which I discovered in MacSweeney's poems: those between north and south which had obvious precedents in the work of Bunting and Harrison (as well as in wider literature), and those which exist between the rural and urban North East in his work.¹⁸ My familiarity with Bunting's celebrated 'Northern' lyricism also caused me to question the connections between him and MacSweeney which I repeatedly encountered in analyses of the younger man's work. My appreciation of the differences between MacSweeney's 'Geordie' identity and Bunting's 'Northumbrian' one and each poet's unlike rendition of his vernacular

¹⁷ Research which resulted in me writing papers for my degree, on: 'Basil Bunting: The Importance of the Regional Voice' (2001), 'Tony Harrison: In his own Voice' (2001) and the dissertation: 'The Importance of Place and Location in the Poetry of Tony Harrison' (2002).

¹⁸ D.C.D. Pocock notes in 'The Novelist's Image of the North' that such divisions have 'been a feature of the country in literature since at least Chaucer's time', *Transactions of the Institute of British Geographers*, New Series, Vol.4, No.1., 1979, p. 66.

led me to examine the role of the poet persona as crucial to MacSweeney's sense of himself.¹⁹ An investigation which was greatly aided by my reading of the poet's 1968 'autobiography': a fascinating cornerstone text which, like MacSweeney's often mentioned *Elegy for January: A Life of Thomas Chatterton* reveals far more about its author than it purports to offer.²⁰

My evaluation of MacSweeney's critical appraisal also highlighted disparities between the specificity of his accredited North East landscapes and the broader notions of the region I had gleaned from reading his work. For whilst I consider Sparty Lea a significant topography and one which extends beyond the confines of *Pearl*, I discovered that the literary regard for this sequence as his quintessential pastoral had tended to overshadow or more usually absorb other notions of Northern landscape in his work. In assessing these wider, and often disparate North East rural geographies, Tom Pickard's description of a flat he held in Newcastle as 'an important location on my map' provided a structural base and led me to explore the 'map' imagery which constitutes another recurring theme in MacSweeney's verse.²¹ In shaping my approach to MacSweeney's North East, I was inspired by what I deemed to be the fascinating implications of Douglas Clark's assessment of 'what makes a poet of MacSweeney's class':

A world is invented in the head and obsession over a generation hammers it home. It plays word games within the skull and evokes similarities to Richard Wagner's leitmotifs. This world is then written down in bits and pieces evoking an alternative reality into which the reader may wander. It stretches from earliest childhood to the present. The themes are everpresent. It is only when the poet's work is viewed as a whole that the vast picture created is revealed [...] few poets have this vision. His work is all of one piece. He is the Prince of Sparty Lea.²²

¹⁹ Bunting fiercely objected to being classed as 'Geordie' and persistently asserted his 'Northumbrian' identity. When questioned on this matter by Peter Bell he declared: 'When I was born Scotswood wasn't Geordie. Geordie stopped with Newcastle, and we were in those days separated from Newcastle by two miles of fields. The border has moved further west all the time of course, but even within what is now part of Tyne and Wear, in the western-most bits, you won't hear much proper Geordie', 'Keele Recordings', cassette 7B, ed. by Richard Swigg, transcribed by the author (Keele: Keele University/Fred Hunter/the Basil Bunting Estate, 1998), Copyright: Oxford University Press, 1994.

²⁰ MacSweeney's 'autobiography' constitutes the preface to his first published collection *The Boy*. Due to my frequent allusions to this text I have included it in full in Appendix Two.

²¹ Groom, Chris., 'Squire: On Television: Interview with Tom Pickard', March 2002, <http://www.lindisfarne.de/interviews/ivtp0203.htm> [accessed 28 August 2007]

²² 'Barry MacSweeney, *The Book of Demons*, 1997, Bloodaxe', 'My Best Poetry Books of 1997', www.dgdclynx.plus.com/lynx/lynx49.html [accessed 4 August 2007]

This statement reinforced my conception of the omnipresence of the poet's locative themes, but it also impelled me to expand such notions and examine not just his 'vision' of Sparty Lea but what I saw as similar processes at work in his portrayals of Newcastle, Northumberland and the wider North East. Other formative texts as regards my research were Clive Bush's comprehensive study of MacSweeney's imagery and precursors in 'Parts in the Weal', Harriet Tarlo's reading of the Bunting influence in 'Radical Landscapes' which details his approach to the 'complex relationship between poet, land, form and language'²³ and Mottram's 'The British Poetry Revival, 1960-75' which contextualised MacSweeney's creative development.

In leading me to a concurrent realisation of the significance of MacSweeney's urban landscapes and of how little sustained critical attention they had previously been accorded, both Peter Barry's appraisal 'Barry MacSweeney, *Hellhound Memos*' (*Contemporary British Poetry and the City*, Manchester, 2000) and Matthew Jarvis' essay 'Presenting the Past: Barry MacSweeney's Cultural Memory' (*Pretexts*, 11.2, 2002) in concurrence with my visits to the Morden Tower and attendance in 2004 of the launch for MacSweeney's posthumous *Horses*, were crucial. In my contextual explorations of the wider subject, Charles Olson's 'Projective Verse' (*Collected Prose*, University of California Press, 1997) and *Charles Olson: Reading at Berkeley* (Coyote, 1966), which MacSweeney named in *Poetry Information* as the source of his first encounter with Olson, helped me to discern some of his formal aspirations. Bloom's *Anxiety of Influence* (Oxford University Press, 1997), Bate's *The Burden of the Past and the English Poet* (Harvard University Press, 1991) and Christopher Ricks' *Allusion to the Poets* (Oxford University Press, 2002) enabled me to assess notions of literary influence. Walter Benjamin's *Illuminations* (Fontana Press, 1992) and Edward Soja's *Postmodern Geographies* (Verso, 1989) helped me to place MacSweeney's urban landscapes, although I minimised my

²³ For 'Parts in the Weal' and 'Radical Landscapes' see 'Abbreviations'. Tarlo writes of Caddel, MacSweeney, O'Sullivan and Simms: 'even as they refuse to deny the presence of the poet in the landscape, we find in these poetries a radical questioning of the idea that land can be translated into words, and of the idea that we can fully perceive or understand the "nature" we find around us' (p. 151).

dependence on such texts to prevent my analysis of his often deeply personal topographies becoming overly theoretical. John H. Johnston's *The Poet and the City: A Study in Urban Perspectives* (University of Georgia Press, 1984) enabled me to realise the reliance of the poet's literary city on international paradigms, whilst Peter Barry's *Poetry Wars* (Salt, 2006) and Richard Caddel and Peter Quartermain's introduction to *Other: British and Irish Poetry Since 1970* entitled 'A Fair Field Full of Folk' (<http://jacketmagazine.com/04/otherbrit.html>) brought a crucial period of literary history and MacSweeney's involvement in it to life.

The remainder of the external reading which shaped my consideration of this subject is listed in the bibliography, however I would like to accord special mention to certain volumes and sources which are not referenced in my footnotes and text and yet significantly impelled my study of MacSweeney's work. Rob Jackaman's *A Study of Cultural Centres and Margins in British Poetry Since 1950: Poets and Publishers* (Lewiston: Edwin Mellen Press, 1995) enabled me to contextualise the tensions in MacSweeney's work, as did Andrew Duncan's 'The mythical history of Northumbria; or feathered slave to unreasonable demands: Barry MacSweeney (1948-2000)'.²⁴ Gary Bridge & Sophie Watson's *The Blackwell City Reader* (Maldon: Blackwell Publishing Ltd, 2002) constituted a useful work of reference; similarly 'Myers Literary Guide: The North East' (<http://www.seaham.i12.com/myers/m-index.html>). J.R.R. Tolkien's 'On Fairy-Stories' in *The Tolkien Reader* (New York: The Random House Publishing Group, 1966) illuminated MacSweeney's conception of Sparty Lea as a storybook realm and Edwin Morgan's *From Glasgow to Saturn* (Cheadle: Carcanet, 1973) expanded my conception of what city poetry could be. Especially valuable, however, was my research into contemporary North East poetry and prose. This study allowed me to construct a framework for MacSweeney's work, and led me to texts such as Sid Chaplin's *The Watchers and the Watched*, Jack Common's *Kidda's Luck*, Julia Darling's *The Taxi-Driver's Daughter* and to

²⁴ *Poetry Salzburg Review* No. 1 (Spring 2001) 128-141

the poems of Jon Silkin, Bob Cooper, Peter Mortimer, Gillian Allnutt, George Charlton, Keith Armstrong and Andy Croft amongst many others, expanding my knowledge of that field.

The Barry MacSweeney Papers, donated to the University of Newcastle upon Tyne by the poet's family in 2000, were resources without which I could never have considered or undertaken a study of this type. My research into MacSweeney's private library proved an edifying experience, providing access not only to all his published work but to his jazz and blues dominated collection of vinyl which yielded those era-evocative influences – Robert Johnson, The Animals, Dylan and Muddy Waters – which had gripped him in adolescence and infused his retrospective 1960s cityscapes. His vast collection of works by the American Beats revealed a penchant for McClure that elucidated the structural forms of his mid-point work, whilst a large selection of local interest tomes, from *Charleton's History of Newcastle upon Tyne* (1950) to *A History of Coal, Coke, Coalfields & Iron Manufacture in Northern England* by W. Fordyce (1860) and *The Great Fire of Newcastle and Gateshead* by Stanley Hurwitz, (1971) confirmed his fascination with the history of his region and city. Yet it was only after acquiring access to the draft and unpublished manuscripts housed in the Library archive and unearthing material such as the 'epic' 'Geordieus Unbound', the poems 'Mizzle Through Slats' and 'This is Newcastle', additional *Pearl* and *Horses* lyrics and much more, that I was able to finally realize both the depth and plurality in his visions of the rural North East and the extent to which Newcastle was for him an inveterate concern. The manuscripts endorsed MacSweeney's belief in the significance of place, revealed his comprehension of a broad North East region and reflected *Ranter's* restless wandering and mapping: 'Returning, returning / Ranter searching for the good thing / the place with a centre' (p. 8). Whilst their detail and the sheer consistency of their responses to the city illuminated the tensions which had occluded it in his published work and enabled me to trace the existence of a career-long progression in his representations of Newcastle. In order to devote deserved attention to the

array of un-researched material that the archive has to offer, this thesis makes extensive use of MacSweeney's unpublished manuscripts. This is a practice which has allowed me new insights into the poet's work, but has also generated a multiplicity of references which I have integrated into my footnotes as usefully but as unobtrusively as possible.

In this thesis I set out to reevaluate some of the truisms pertaining to MacSweeney's poetic which I had repeatedly encountered during my early research, and which I regarded as responsible for perpetuating many of the misleading assumptions and inaccurate appraisals of the poet's work. By first of all repositioning such beliefs, I had hoped to provide an original and inclusive evaluation of MacSweeney's North East landscapes. In practice, I encountered a great deal more. I discovered the poet's unquenchable passion for the region; his continual restlessness and a notion of identity beset by geographical tensions; a wish to self-exclude and to find refuge in 'Bolt-holes of memory' (*Ranter*, p. 11) and an empathetic social indignation that undermined his self-isolation by revealing an inherent sense of community founded on common affiliation to place. Yet above all I identified in his work the impulse to return, again and again to the North East landscapes which he deemed fundamental to his own disposition and to the character of his province and its people.

Part One: Rural Landscapes

Chapter One: The Bunting Influence: ‘A key figure in his literary universe’?

Thirty years ago Basil Bunting published *Briggflatts* [...] and set the standard for subsequent English poetry. He exhibited a dazzling surface texture of language whilst telling a story [...]. Amongst the English postmoderns only Barry MacSweeney has demonstrated a comparable influence.¹

[MacSweeney’s] real position relates to a tradition of English poetry that goes back through Basil Bunting (a key figure in his literary universe, sharing MacSweeney’s region, the North East of England, as well as his poetic) to Gerard Manley Hopkins.²

In the preface to his first collection of poetry *The Boy from the Green Cabaret Tells of His Mother* (1968), nineteen year-old Barry MacSweeney alludes to a literary encounter which has since been regarded as one of the most influential of his career: ‘Began job as reporter on local evening paper. Met Basil Bunting, poet [...] Showed Bunting *Walk* poem, it came back sliced down to about 4 lines and a note: Start again from there. My first real lesson.’³ Unable to predict the implications or longevity of the association he evoked, MacSweeney’s citation of the anecdote at this seminal literary-historical juncture nonetheless provides an intriguing insight into the genesis of a poetic legacy that was to prove enormously significant in the popular appraisal of his work.⁴ Yet on close examination, the intention of his reference is far from clear: its guarded nature and non-committal tones redolent of an ambiguity which not only provokes questions over what, if any, degree of influence he had hoped to imply, but which confirms the need for a revaluation of the private and poetic dynamic which existed

¹ Douglas Clark, ‘A Lifetime of Poetry’, www.dgdclynx.plus.com/lynx/lynx/12.html [accessed 20 June 2004]

² John Sears, ‘Out of Control’.

³ ‘The autobiography of Barry MacSweeney’, *The Boy*. Although Bunting’s advice on condensing the line was occasionally adopted by MacSweeney (he cites *Brother Wolf* as a key verse example in *Poetry Information*, p. 36), he often attributed his use of it to professional experience: ‘He [Basil] taught me a lot of things, and I was under the impression in fact that journalism taught me to be brief’ (*Poetry Information*, p. 22).

⁴ Even if MacSweeney did intend to present himself in the instance of his celebrated predecessor, it is unlikely that he could have anticipated the regularity with which the connection would be regurgitated in their critical appreciation.

between these two North East poets, and of popular assumptions relating to Bunting's impact on the form and development of MacSweeney's verse, ultimately leading us to enquire for how long, and in what capacity, Bunting was indeed 'a key figure in his literary universe'?

If approached as an avowal of influence, MacSweeney's preface can be seen to avoid obsequiousness and specific parallels whilst allusively sustaining the Bunting connection by inferring associations between himself and a poet distanced from him by over four decades of experience. References to 'Newcastle', 'Morden Tower' and lyrical 'economy' all evoke the elder's image and are reinforced by the subtextual inference of their parallel temperaments. MacSweeney's distaste for modern urban civilization, ('commuters with a vengeance'); his sulky self-deprecation in the face of bureaucratic rejection ('they didn't like the cut of my face either') and his innate sense of regional difference ('the land was flat, that was a shock. An utter antithesis to Newcastle') are all in evidence here. Thus, his statement neatly echoes the convictions of a man who detested the 'stifling deference so many people in this country still show to a Cambridge degree or a Kensington accent' and complained that 'its unfortunate for England, as well as for myself, that after sixty years of fairly good work without pay, I haven't even a house of my own to die in'.⁵ That in 1968 Bunting was experiencing a resurgence of public recognition engendered by the publication of 'one of the most enduring embodiments of his northerness' in the extended poem *Briggflatts*, plus 'a long overdue *Collected Poems* [...] which cemented his reputation' must have been a consideration.⁶ So that MacSweeney's astute suggestion of coterie together with the apposite timing of *The Boy* could be seen as an attempt to exploit his own North East derivation and personal acquaintance with Bunting in order to establish a context for his own original publication. His preface is designed to assert

⁵ 'Keele Recordings', cassette 3B.

⁶ Richard Caddel & Anthony Flowers, *Basil Bunting: A Northern Life* (Newcastle upon Tyne: Newcastle Libraries and Information Service, 1997), p. 47. Hereafter referred to as Caddel/Flowers. Bunting was also awarded the 'Northern Arts Literary Fellowship at the Universities of Durham and Newcastle' in 1968 (Caddel/Flowers, p. 48).

his legitimacy within the contemporary publishing scene on the basis of a similarly ‘regional’ and thus, in the context of the late 1960s ‘Poetry Revival’, *de rigueur* poetic.⁷

Yet the complexities involved in MacSweeney’s attitude to Bunting begin to become apparent when we realise that it is equally possible to read this statement as a rejection of his influence, where in the context of this despondent, petulantly ironic and emotionally candid address (in which he describes poetry as ‘a cissy thing to do’, his period at Harlow as ‘bitter and solitary’ and concludes ‘Nobody returns in glory’) his comment may be interpreted either as veiled sarcasm as to the unhelpful brevity of the ‘lesson’ or as his juvenile refutation of ‘accepted’ literary influence.⁸ Whilst Bunting and his advice are certainly invoked it is with no especial remark amidst several eclectic influences including ‘Rimbaud’s *Illuminations* and ‘The Drunken Boat’, ‘Baudelaire’, ‘Laforque’, ‘Cros’, ‘Corbiere’ and those other North East contemporaries Pickard and Silkin: a list which implies the poet’s intent to pursue French symbolism as much as a Northumbrian tradition. Adopting a geographical posture directly contrary to Bunting’s, MacSweeney emphasises his own urban roots, naming his birthplace as ‘Benwell, Newcastle On Tyne’ and affirming an intense connection to the city environment: ‘In Newcastle I was always too involved, always leaving pieces of myself against the walls’, the suffocating implications of which (combined with an allusion to being ‘in France’) further exemplify his anti-provincial stance. Rejecting Bunting’s refusal to acknowledge any direct association between poetry and landscape, MacSweeney uses his preface to express just that,

⁷ A similar incident transpired between the aspiring working-class poet William Heaton and ‘England’s poet laureate’ William Wordsworth when the latter responded to a poetic dedication by the former with a missive he gave Heaton permission to publish, and which, despite containing ‘no comment about Heaton’s verse’ acted ‘as a kind of imprimatur at the front of his *Flowers of Calderdale*, calling attention to the respectability and ability of the poet. Perhaps it also helped sales’ (Martha Vicinus, *The Industrial Muse: A Study of Nineteenth Century British Working-Class Literature* (London: Croom Helm, 1974), p. 169.

⁸ This ‘first real lesson’ thus becomes a dismissive and almost personal rebuke, when in fact it was simply Bunting’s stock response on receiving verse from friends, colleagues and protégés alike. In his advice to poets he advised them to ‘Jettison ornament gaily’ and ‘Cut out every word you dare [...] Do it again a week later, and again’ (‘I Suggest’, Caddel/Flowers, p. 49) whilst he gave similar instruction to both Pickard and Ginsberg, the latter of whom cheerily accepted the guidance: ‘happy circumstances for a poet, and happier to hear Bunting’s concern – “Too many words, condense still more”’, *High on the Walls: A Morden Tower Anthology*, ed. by Gordon Brown (Newcastle upon Tyne: Morden Tower/Bloodaxe Books, 1990), p. 59. MacSweeney’s own response is perhaps an early indication of his proclivity for enhancing the underdog nature of his every situation.

stating of Newcastle: ‘The city gave words a harshness, like the steel or coal’, and of Harlow: ‘Everything was so clean and clear-cut [...] It was impossible to get involved [...] events and actions got a natural response’: a clear acknowledgement of place affecting composition.

An ‘autobiography’ written by a teenage poet at the outset of his career is of specific usefulness in that it necessarily encapsulates both a narrow timescale and adolescent point of view. Yet the manner in which MacSweeney’s statement appears to concurrently invite and reject the implications of the Bunting influence makes it unusually evocative of a concern that affected his enduring literary reputation. That is, whether it is ultimately constructive to view MacSweeney’s ‘rural’ lyrics as embedded in a tradition of internationally conscious modernist landscape poetry in the mode of *Briggflatts*, or whether the customary tendency to associate him with Bunting which initially helped to legitimise MacSweeney’s forays into publication has become a counterproductive prerequisite which encourages the recognition of literary comparisons between them that may not always exist.⁹ An undeniably intricate conundrum, the affiliation between these two has been complicated by the disproportionate weight often attributed to MacSweeney’s remarks stating his regard for Bunting’s poetic without proper regard for their chronological context (their having been made before his knowledge of Olson prompted him to readjust his poetic lineage)¹⁰ and by MacSweeney’s own shifting stance on the matter: at first genuinely enthused by Bunting’s methods (advising a fellow poet: ‘in all poems, let him heed Basil – cut out all non-essential words’)¹¹ but also quick to satirise him in his verse: is Bunting the ‘fraud’ ‘from my town’ of the younger man’s ‘The Last Bud’?¹²

⁹ It is almost exclusively MacSweeney’s work relating to the delineation of Northern rural landscapes that is critically linked with Bunting.

¹⁰ ‘It wasn’t until then that suddenly a massive vista opened up, projective verse, and I studied it for a long time and read all the Olson I could get hold of, and read about Black Mountain. “The figure of the outward” is a phrase, but for me it means like taking a language outside of the ego, the self, one’s own personal relationships, and suddenly realising that all that land is out there’ (*Poetry Information*, p. 30).

¹¹ Archive: BM: 1/2. Letter to Lillian MacSweeney. MacSweeney also advises that Bob Proud should read the ‘Collected Bunting’.

¹² ‘Once I had a friend / from my town. Now he is a fraud. Once / he was my golden calf, but now warped by / that guilt-necked stream, he twists about / the stone, and chokes the living good’ (‘The Last Bud’ [I], *The Last Bud*, Newcastle upon Tyne: Blacksuede Boot Press, 1969. Hereafter referred to as *The Last Bud*). MacSweeney

Several critics have suggested that a disproportionate focus on MacSweeney's alcoholism has adversely affected the reception of his poetry,¹³ yet it is rarely accepted that his equally well-documented links with Bunting may have occasioned similar distortions, especially when the influence is taken to apply to thirty-five years of his work. To propose that all comparative evaluations of these two poets are misguided would be untrue, but there is certainly a need for some clarification of their affiliation in order to establish which aspects of the relationship did (and did not) affect the development of MacSweeney's poetic, his understanding of his own regional identity and his realisation of northern rural landscapes in his work.

Many of the misconceptions relating to the pair's affiliation have arisen from popular assumption, where connections founded on occupational and biographical rather than formal poetic grounds have been projected onto a myth of mentorship and literary influence:

Born in Newcastle upon Tyne [MacSweeney] worked as a professional journalist throughout most of his life. He met poet Basil Bunting when they were both working at the *Newcastle Evening Chronicle* in the mid-1960s.¹⁴

The brief historical conjunction of the two poets' professional trajectories is for many critics one of the most compelling aspects of their acquaintanceship, where both the elusiveness, and the repetitive nature of recorded first-hand particulars allow scope for speculation and contribute to its critical appeal. The opportunities for literary myth-making engendered by this period of journalistic colleagueship have been duly noted in a variety of appraisals, most of which adhere in some form to the depiction of an instructional mentor-protégé relationship whilst inferring the benefits of such for the young poet's literary career. One retrospective

was notoriously opposed to anything 'establishment', presumably including the increasingly mainstream popularity achieved by Bunting in the later 1960s.

¹³ One website 'appreciation' of MacSweeney bemoans the critical over-insistence on his addiction (before proceeding to immediately evoke the professional connection between the poets discussed here) stating: 'most biographies concentrate on MacSweeney's drinking. Most criticism dramatises his writing in terms of this aspect of his life', Mathew John Williams, 'Honoured Treefrogs: Barry MacSweeney', www.poetropical.co.uk/treefrog/sweeny.htm [accessed 10 August 2007], whilst Jeff Nuttall objects in more vociferous manner: 'His gastronomic life was of no real importance. His work was unique' ('A Poet at Full Throttle', *Guardian*, 7 June 2000, 'Letters to the Editor', p. 21).

¹⁴ Anon, 'Barry MacSweeney', http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Barry_MacSweeney [accessed 08 August 2007]

summary of MacSweeney's life affirms the elder man's workplace seniority: 'At the offices of the *Chronicle* he came into contact with Basil Bunting who was then working as sub-editor'¹⁵ whilst another cites his concurrently exalted literary standing: 'Basil Bunting was at the *Chronicle*, receiving overdue recognition as England's major modernist poet'¹⁶ and many accentuate the significance of the factors combined: [MacSweeney became] 'a cub reporter on the *Evening Chronicle* [...] a move which, as luck would have it, brought him into direct contact with a grizzled greybeard who had counted Ford Madox Ford, W B Yeats and Ezra Pound among his friends'.¹⁷ This last remark, reinforcing as it does the illustrious associative possibilities MacSweeney was able to confer upon himself by linking his persona to that of Bunting, clearly demonstrates both what he had to gain from stating the professional (and by inference poetic) correlation, and also perhaps why the relationship, replete with its authentic literary heritage, became one of the most critically repeated particulars of his career.

Yet whilst their professional contact is undisputed, an understanding of the effects this had on MacSweeney's poetic education has been somewhat clouded by a trend which states the fact either as a self-explanatory affirmation of influence, or simply as a matter of course ('A newspaper man, including at the *Newcastle Evening Chronicle* with Basil Bunting'),¹⁸ and often appears more concerned with sustaining a fable of mentorship than uncovering any actual literary inspiration. In his Bunting biography, for example, Keith Alldritt ambiguously declares: 'Someone who worked with him at the time was the young Newcastle poet Barry MacSweeney. They worked just ten yards apart in the office and talked much about poetry', depicting an erudite scene which is immediately undermined by his citation of MacSweeney's own rather more humdrum recollection: "'Basil used to have to tell me off every time I made the tidetables incorrect [...] he used to come up and scold me and say you've added this up all

¹⁵ Helen Arkwright, 'The Barry MacSweeney Collection', www.ncl.ac.uk/elli/research/literature/macsweney [accessed 4 August 2007]

¹⁶ Andrew Crozier, 'Barry MacSweeney', *Guardian*, 18 May 2000, obituaries, p. 24.

¹⁷ Gordon Burn, 'Message in a Bottle', *Guardian*, 1 June 2000.

¹⁸ Mathew John Williams, 'Honoured Treefrogs: Barry MacSweeney'.

wrong”¹⁹ Bunting may have regaled his colleagues with tales of his Modernist escapades, yet it is not immediately apparent what real effect such storytelling, or his advice on poetic composition had on the actual content of MacSweeney’s first publication, which is in many respects far more urban (many of the poems concern Newcastle, few its more rural environs), location-specific (‘Tynemouth priory stands / sepia walled [...] cliffs plait / light brown and black / into shapes’),²⁰ and circumlocutory (‘Love may be compared with a rainbow, but that is romance / and not what Love is’)²¹ than anything that Bunting would have advocated. In addition, the influences MacSweeney does acknowledge in *The Boy* (including ‘Rimbaud and Verlaine’, the former being the ‘Boy’ from the title,²² and the Russian versifiers with whom he wishes to ‘drink vodka’) are far more redolent of his juvenile-rebellious notions of self-representation than the Modernists conjured by the anecdotes of his elder.²³

For many poets of MacSweeney’s generation who either deliberately chose to eschew, or were shunned by the English mainstream (that which according to Caddel and Quartermain constituted a ‘narrow lineage of contemporary poets from Phillip Larkin to Craig Raine and Simon Armitage’ whose ‘typical poem is a closed, monolineal utterance, demanding little of the reader but passive consumption’), Bunting’s late-blooming career and liberating, anti-centralist philosophies provided an obvious ‘exemplar’.²⁴ Yet whilst the legacy for which Bunting stood was intensified in MacSweeney’s case by his first-hand connection – and thus a

¹⁹ *The Poet As Spy: The Life and Wild Times of Basil Bunting* (London: Aurum Press, 1998), p. 144. This remark by MacSweeney (which mirrors the irreverent tone of his ‘autobiography’), is reinforced as a realistic version of events by Bunting’s biographers’ affirmation of their subject’s unhappiness in his journalistic role. Victoria Forde notes that Bunting regarded his acceptance of the post as “‘a great mistake’”, *The Poetry of Basil Bunting*, (Newcastle upon Tyne: Bloodaxe Books, 1991), pp. 55-6, and Alldritt that ‘Basil was not at all comfortable with his colleagues’, citing his complaint: “‘Provincial journalists are not capable of any sort of thought at all’” (*The Poet as Spy*, pp. 143-4). Caddel/Flowers also confirm his occupational dissatisfaction, noting that: ‘It is fair to say that Bunting found his work as a journalist stultifying’ (p. 45). Amidst such an atmosphere of ‘discontent’ and ‘irritation’ and considering MacSweeney’s role as one of the ‘provincial journalists’ to whom Bunting was referring, it is justifiable to query the degree to which the young ‘apprentice’ benefited from the relationship at this point.

²⁰ ‘Walk’, *The Boy*, p. 9.

²¹ ‘For A Pale Time, No Matter’, *ibid*, p. 19.

²² ‘The Track, Fervour’, *ibid*, p. 26.

²³ ‘For Andrei Voznesensky, for her’, *ibid*, p. 15.

²⁴ Caddel, Richard & Peter Quartermain: ‘A Fair Field Full of Folk’, *Jacket Magazine* #4, <http://jacketmagazine.com/04/otherbrit.html> [accessed 10 August 2007]

prime opportunity to claim continuity with the poets of a past generation – neither he, nor his contemporaries found much to relate to in their forms or ideals, being lured instead by a more modern strain of ‘American poetry and its tradition: “not that of Pound and Eliot but that of Pound and Williams”’.²⁵ In his introduction to *The New British Poetry*, Eric Mottram notes this distinction, stating the importance for his own generation of ‘senior figures [...] Hugh MacDiarmid, Basil Bunting and David Jones – all poets deeply aware of and affected by the poetics of modernism’, but maintaining the influence on the ‘Revival’ poets of a greater range of contemporary American writers who were being made available through small presses such as Migrant, Fulcrum and Goliard.²⁶ Neil Corcoran extends this point in a manner specifically relevant to MacSweeney by separating the British ‘Pound’ tradition into ‘two separate forms’: ‘Pound/Eliot’ and ‘Pound/Williams/Olson’: the latter of which he describes as ‘more fugitive, deliberately ignoring “mainstream” British publishers, and choosing instead publication by little magazine and small press’.²⁷ It appears therefore, that rather than being invigorated by the proximity of Modernist legitimisation, MacSweeney’s generation (and perhaps especially the poet himself due to his direct contact with Bunting) reacted against the reverence of their elders for these past masters, preferring to seek out specifically modern forms through which to differentiate them from what they regarded as an outmoded tradition.

Another perpetually (and inevitably) reiterated connection between these two poets is their common North East origin; their subsequent association with the Newcastle branch of the ‘British Poetry Revival’ and their respective roles in the emergence of the Morden Tower poetry readings. For in much the same way as MacSweeney’s ‘autobiography’ may be seen as constructing a literary-regional-historical framework for his early work, many introductions

²⁵ Andrew Crozier cited by Hampson/Barry, ‘Introduction’ in *New British Poetries: The Scope of the Possible* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1993), pp. 1-11 (p. 6).

²⁶ Eric Mottram, ‘Introduction’ to ‘A Treacherous Assault on British Poetry’ in *The New British Poetry*, ed., Gillian Allnutt, Fred D’Aguiar, Ken Edwards & Eric Mottram (London: Paladin, 1988), pp. 131-132. Hampson/Barry also use Mottram’s comments to make the same point in their ‘Introduction’ to *The Scope of the Possible*, p. 6.

²⁷ ‘Varieties of Neo-Modernism: Christopher Middleton, Roy Fisher, J.H. Prynne’, in *English Poetry Since 1940* (Longman, 1993), pp. 164-179 (pp. 164-5).

to these poets (both reasonably and beneficially) employ this geographical hook in order to provide a broad platform for their interpretation or study:

MacSweeney commenced writing early and, as a consequence of maturing in Newcastle during the 1960's was influenced by the vigour of the poetry scene at that time [...] Bunting's poetry, and those of younger contemporaries, could be heard at the Morden Tower [...] MacSweeney was both contributor and participant at these readings²⁸

Nicholas Johnson's 'Appreciation' of MacSweeney states that the poet 'became swept up by the vital transatlantic public poetry that travelled [...] through London, up to Newcastle and out to Wylam': thus specifically invoking the Bunting connection,²⁹ whilst another obituary devotes three of its sparse lines to: 'During the 1960s, MacSweeney's native Newcastle was the scene of a regional efflorescence of poetry writing and reading, centred on Morden Tower. Basil Bunting, Tom Pickard and Jon Silkin [...] were active in the area'.³⁰ That the poets' common regional origin is perhaps the single most repeated fact of their reciprocal association both highlights its respective individual import and subverts its usefulness as a mode for their comparison. For although helpful in establishing a context for MacSweeney's early creative development, a critical overemphasis on this particular has often lead to it being appropriated as a basis from which to draw distorting, or simply unnecessarily repetitive literary analogies:

poets were also drawn by Basil Bunting [...] whose precision and rich textuality was equally relevant to Pickard and MacSweeney.³¹

²⁸ <http://www.ncl.ac.uk/elll/research/literature/macsweeney/index.htm>.

²⁹ Nicholas Johnson, 'Barry MacSweeney: An Appreciation', *Independent*, 13 May 2000. Wylam being Bunting's main place of residence in his later years, and where Pickard visited in order to invite him to read at the Tower.

³⁰ Anon, 'Barry MacSweeney', *The Times*, 22 May 2000, 'Lives in Brief', p. 21. Aside from the above remark and the citation of MacSweeney's dates the only other references included here are to his failed nomination for the Oxford Poetry Chair and his 'poetry books of romantic myth-making and harrowing introspection, dealing not least with his own alcoholism', a prescient journalistic example of the reiteration which has characterised the poet's wider public perception.

³¹ Nicholas Johnson: 'Barry MacSweeney: An Appreciation'.

he's proud of the strength of his language [...] a Factor X which includes Northern-ness, stubborn-ness, and a Bunting-like need to keep singing the North into poetic existence;³²

Declaring himself a poet and refusing compromise, he has walked, in Bunting's terms, among the bogus, with an absolute sense of appointment.³³

Pickard and MacSweeney shared Bunting's interest in reviving Northumbrian vowel patterns and verbal music in poetry'.³⁴

That this concept of erudite tutelage founded on common regionality was more gloss than substance is no better illustrated than by contrasting MacSweeney's muted and defensive recollections of Bunting, with the mutual flattery and endorsement which characterised the relationship between the latter and his saviour-protégé Tom Pickard. For where MacSweeney nonchalantly recalls his first encounter with Bunting, Pickard's memories tend rather towards eulogy: 'He talked of Persia, America and Italy [...] When he asked if I wrote poetry myself, I confessed I did but had not taken any to show him, out of shyness. "Well, you must come again, and bring your poems along."' ³⁵ And whilst Bunting was dismissive of the merits of modern British verse and rarely ever alluded to MacSweeney (except once to mention him providing MacDiarmid with a glass of water during a reading)³⁶ his preface to Pickard's first collection abounds with praise for his: 'fresh eyes' and 'fresh voice [...] skill to keep the line

³² Ian McMillan: 'More Hyphens, Please!', *Poetry Review* 87.4 (1997). McMillan does admit that he is struggling to describe the poet's lyrics, saying: 'You can see by the way I'm shovelling out hyphens that MacSweeney is difficult to classify'.

³³ Clive Bush, 'Parts in the Weal', p. 416. Whilst most of these analogies are constructed with positive intentions, Martin Stannard's 'An Open Letter to Rupert Loydell Concerning Barry MacSweeney's *Selected Poems*', uses the same comparison to signify his dislike of both poets: 'it turned out that the book was very difficult to open. It reminded me of when I was supposed to be reading Basil Bunting's big book. In fact, it was exactly the same experience', www.stridemag.pwp.blueyonder.co.uk/2003/October/stannard.html [accessed 10 August 2007].

³⁴ Anon, 'The British Poetry Revival', http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/British_Poetry_Revival. [accessed 3 September 2007]. My justification for the use of this somewhat maligned source is to show the broad level at which this belief is repeated and held.

³⁵ Tom Pickard, 'Serving My Time to a Trade', *High on The Walls: A Morden Tower Anthology*, p. 14. Pickard's account is written entirely in this awestruck vein: 'It is difficult to explain the emotion felt at hearing for the first time a great and accomplished work read by its author... The experience was moving and revealing'.

³⁶ 'Some Jazz from the Baz: The Bunting-Williams Letters', in *The Star You Steer By: Basil Bunting and British Modernism*, ed. by James McGonigal & Richard Price (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2000), pp. 253-284 (p. 262).

compact and musical', and rather zealously continues: 'I find here [...] a sound that suggests some of the earliest writers in the Greek Anthology'.³⁷ That Bunting's preference for Pickard formatively affected MacSweeney's relationship with these men is evident in his anxious self-distancing from both; in comments he made regarding his 'tetchy' and 'wary' relationship with Pickard,³⁸ and perhaps most tellingly in Andrew Duncan's recollection: 'When I went to interview Barry MacSweeney in Newcastle, his mother remarked at one point that Pickard had made his whole career out of being a friend of Basil Bunting in the 1960s'.³⁹ For whilst W. E. Parkinson berated what he saw as a 'sympathetic circularity' among the triumvirate, a notion he appears to have based on the concurrence between Bunting's 'What the Chairman Told Tom' and MacSweeney's 'On The Apology Owed Tom Pickard', it is clear from the marked disparity in tone between MacSweeney's ambiguous allusions to his fellow poets and their vociferous celebrations of each other that he undoubtedly – and most likely deliberately and antagonistically – occupied the position of marginalised 'other' in this equation.⁴⁰

MacSweeney's remarks apropos his attendance at the Morden Tower poetry readings are equally illuminating here. For although undoubtedly inspired by the activities which were taking place, he remained deliberately reticent about his own participation, stating in *Poetry Information*: 'I was involved to some extent with the Tower, i.e. I used to go there, and I did help Tom out a little bit', but also admitting: 'Tom and Connie were very much in charge at the Morden [...] They knew all the contacts and that's fine [...] I think we were all jealous of

³⁷ 'Preface', to *High on the Walls* (London: Fulcrum Press, 1967), p. 9. The cover of Pickard's publication states in large bold letters across the bottom: 'Preface by Basil Bunting', a less subtle approach to self-legitimation than was attempted a year later (if indeed it was at all) by MacSweeney himself.

³⁸ *Poetry Information*, p. 26.

³⁹ 'Fluent Lads', <http://www.pinko.org/38.html>. [accessed 10 August 2007]

⁴⁰ 'Poetry in the North East', in *British Poetry Since 1960: A Critical Survey*, ed. Michael Schmidt & Grevel Lindop (Oxford: Carcanet, 1972), pp. 107-121 (p. 112). Parkinson writes: 'Another objectionable strain in [Bunting's] work, and in that of Pickard and MacSweeney, is the sympathetic circularity set up through poems like "What the Chairman Told Tom", and introductions in which each genuflects towards the other. This looking for comfort and approbation is symptomatic of "the man of sensitivity" living in a hostile society that hates "Art"'.

each other actually.’⁴¹ MacSweeney’s contribution to *High on the Walls: A Morden Tower Anthology* seems to emphasise that, contrary to popular belief, it was less the revered local ‘master’ and more the transatlantic contributors who prompted his attendance: ‘Ginsberg [...] visited the Tower. It was a packed brilliant evening. After his visit [...] Corso, Ferlinghetti, Dorn, Creeley, Trocchi, Harwood, Raworth’, to which he adds ‘and, of course, Bunting’: an almost afterthought.⁴² Such attempts to gently segregate his own poetic education from that embodied by the Bunting/Pickard dynamic are again reinforced in *Poetry Information* in the defensively anti-provincial remark: ‘I like to change quite a lot. I don’t like to hang about in places too long’ and are implied in his lyrical references to Tom Pickard which range from the conspiratorial (the early lyric ‘VANGUARD’ (iv) runs: ‘thanks tom / for the lift and at this particular / point in time I’m not / referring / to the car’)⁴³ to the outright satirical: ‘me porse is empty wi potry’.⁴⁴ All of which asides seem designed to fracture these personal connections, revealing the extent to which MacSweeney was aware of the pressures of his acquaintances.

Another reason for the traditional critical association of Bunting and MacSweeney is the existence of several coincidental biographical similarities which contributed in analogous ways to their developing perception of their own native identities. The socio-economically resonant location of their births, one in a pit village, the other in a working-class area of the city and both in the marginalized North East of England, meant that they were situated from the outset in an adversarial position ‘on the edge of power, on the periphery of culture, on the edge of empire’, living ‘in the margins’.⁴⁵ Furthermore, neither poet’s father was indigenous to the North East, Bunting’s having migrated from Heanor in Derbyshire and MacSweeney’s hailing from ‘the Isle of Dogs’,⁴⁶ a commonality which provided each man with an ‘other’

⁴¹ *Poetry Information*, pp. 23-26.

⁴² Barry MacSweeney, *High on the Walls: A Morden Tower Anthology*, p. 86.

⁴³ *Viareggio*.

⁴⁴ ‘Geordieus Unbound’, Archive: BM: 2/2.

⁴⁵ Peter Quartermain, *Basil Bunting: Poet of the North* (Durham: Basil Bunting Poetry Archive, 1990), p. 5.

⁴⁶ *Poetry Information*, p. 21.

locational identity which became subjugated by a stronger North Eastern sense in his work. For Bunting, whose relationship with his father was respectful but never close,⁴⁷ this lack of a male-legitimised ancestral connection to the region seemed to reinforce his need to construct a powerful notion of own his 'Northumbrian' identity in his verse and place a greater stress on his maternal kinship: 'Basil boasted that his mother Annie Cheeseman Bunting, the daughter of Annie Foster and Isaac Taylor Cheeseman, a local mine manager, was related to most of the Border families, including the Charltons'.⁴⁸ For MacSweeney, whose situation was more volatile and thus a base for even stronger geographical distinctions, it led to the depreciation of London, and to a lesser extent Northern Ireland in his work, as denotative of the violent male parent,⁴⁹ whilst fuelling a determination to affiliate his identity with that of his maternal relations: 'Our Calvert past is so tremendously noble'.⁵⁰ The latter of which materialised in his exaltation of North East landscapes; in the depiction of Sparty Lea as his haven, and in the emotional intensity which he instilled into the rural Northumbrian imagery in his work:

Allendale rosehip
 whose fruit blood dries
 lichen is armour
 against these sores.⁵¹

That both poets were (albeit temporarily) displaced from their native North East at a comparatively early age and placed in an unfamiliar southern environment, Bunting at schools in Yorkshire and Berkshire, where he protested: "I think there must be some great underlying

⁴⁷ Caddel/Flowers note that Bunting termed his father 'a rather remarkable doctor' (p. 11) but that it was his mother and her Northumbrian family of whom he was most vociferously proud.

⁴⁸ Victoria Forde, *The Poetry of Basil Bunting*, p. 15. Despite living over half of his life away from the region and rarely representing it in his poetry, Basil Bunting's 'Northumbrianess' – largely as a result of Briggflatts' – remains one of the most infamously repeated and critically discussed facts of his existence.

⁴⁹ 'set for the Donnybrook Road / prison conditions and ships into port / the violence of the warders universal' (*Pearl* ['Draft B'], Archive: BM: 1/18/2).

⁵⁰ 'Sam Arrives To Take Grandad for the Dawn Tickling', *Horses*, p. 36.

⁵¹ *Blackbird*. MacSweeney's 'elegy' for his maternal grandfather William Calvert directly associates the poet's maternal family with the landscape which was vital to his recollection of such experiences.

difference between North & South [...] people with Southern manners are, for me, utterly ‘impossible’ & hateful”’,⁵² and MacSweeney at Harlow Technical College where his disquiet concerned the uniformity of the landscape and the rootless residents who embodied for him ‘An opposite life altogether’.⁵³ had analogous affects on their developing philosophies. For whilst the validating historical detail which characterises each man’s work stemmed from a burgeoning consciousness of the geographical ‘otherness’ of the region into which they were born, this sense was certainly exacerbated (if it was not created), by such juvenile encounters with locational difference. These formative conflicts, when magnified by the poets’ naturally antagonistic personalities, were to become central impetuses in their representations of their native territories and selves and major influences on their notions of belonging and alienation, manifesting in Bunting’s work in his construction of stanzas formed to mirror the cadences of North East speech to the self-professedly deliberate exclusion of a section of his readership, as he argued that ‘Southrons would maul the music of many lines in *Briggflatts*’.⁵⁴ For MacSweeney such locative schisms often reached beyond the linguistic (‘paranoid Marxist Cambridge prefects, / self-appointed guarantors of consonants and vowels’,⁵⁵ ‘I say: Fight the language which is nailed and then driven down!’)⁵⁶ to inform broader notions of cultural and emotional incompatibility, with ‘southern’ places used in his work as signifiers for corruption and superficiality: ‘too many Cambridges between you / and the love of your life / poetry’, ‘nowhere place, Devon for example’, ‘Lucifer [...] the Stevenage boy away for the game’.⁵⁷

This ingrained geographical hostility, particularly towards institutions representative of ‘centralised’ and therefore southern rule, was also amplified in each poet’s work due to yet another biographical commonality: their tempestuous professional dealings with the literary

⁵² Caddel/Flowers, p. 17. Bunting also reputedly informed his headmaster: ‘I think it is your duty to give me my fare to Newcastle’.

⁵³ ‘The autobiography of Barry MacSweeney’, *The Boy*.

⁵⁴ Basil Bunting, ‘Note to Briggflatts’, in *Complete Poems*, ed. by Richard Caddel (Newcastle Upon Tyne: Bloodaxe Books, 2000), p. 226.

⁵⁵ ‘Sweet Jesus: Pearl’s Prayer’, *Demons*, p. 12.

⁵⁶ ‘Victory Over Darkness and The Sunne’, *Horses*, p. 28.

⁵⁷ ‘I Am Lucifer’, *Postcards*.

establishment and subsequently perceived rejection. Bunting, who was aggrieved both by his initial lack of public recognition and later by what he saw as the refusal of the Arts Council of England to provide for him in old age, remained bitterly hostile towards the English capital and everything it represented, an antipathy which provided him with yet another platform on which to promote the moral as well as the artistic primacy of Northumberland and its culture. In 1984 he demonstrated the strength of his sentiment, stating in a letter to Jonathan Williams: ‘I believe all that underlies the North is horrifying to our C. of E., Southron rulers and their academic sycophants’, and in another, ‘I hated going to London [...] but the money couldn’t be turned down’.⁵⁸ MacSweeney, who also suffered early at the hands of the establishment after being humiliated in his nomination for the Oxford Chair and then finding himself ‘Surplus to requirements: edged out, marginalized; exiled from the mainstream’,⁵⁹ adopted a similarly oppositional stance which caused him to secede his pastoral North East wherever possible from southern corruption (‘So fresh / we lean into the wind that rushes right past Parliament. Air / so northern away from the dulled and money-sodden crèche they call the south’)⁶⁰ and even commandeer Bunting’s phrase for its populace in a seeming nod to their analogous opinions: ‘pansy southron students’.⁶¹ Such remarkably equivalent experiences in these poets’ careers strengthened the perspectives which informed their work, combining an intense love of their native landscape (alongside a recognition of its flaws) with an enmity towards outsiders which emerged most powerfully when they pursued geographical themes.

The repetitive use of the associations outlined above has facilitated their survival as an integral part of the perception of MacSweeney’s poetics to the extent that they have also been translated (in remarkably similar form) into detailed critical analyses of the connection. In *New British Poetries: The Scope of the Possible*, Mottram summarises each man’s role in the

⁵⁸ ‘Some Jazz from the Bazz’, pp. 278-282.

⁵⁹ Gordon Burn, ‘Message in a Bottle’.

⁶⁰ ‘Mary Bell Sonnets’ [‘Despite Everything its There’, no. 73, #2], Archive: BM 2/9/1.

⁶¹ ‘Good Times Gone Truly Bad’, Archive: BM: 1/19/2.

‘Poetry Revival’ and the administration of *Poetry Review*, praising Bunting’s synthesis of ‘a prosody learned from English renaissance poetics’ with ‘local Northumberland historical, geological and linguistic culture’ and identifying as its counterpart ‘the combination of the instance of Thomas Chatterton and the landscape of the North East in MacSweeney’s *Brother Wolf*’.⁶² Mottram’s comparison here is entirely justifiable, yet it is one deliberately enhanced by the use of biographical and regional detail. Similarly, in ‘Parts in the Weal’, Bush focuses on the development of MacSweeney’s poetical voice whilst consolidating popular dogma by describing Bunting as the younger man’s ‘informal tutor’ (p. 21), ‘poet mentor’ (p. 306) ‘old master’ (p. 309) and as the initiator of an ‘injunction “to sing, not paint [...] laying the tune on the air”’ which was used by MacSweeney as a ‘decisive orientation’ as early as *Boulevard*.⁶³ Such examples demonstrate the extent to which Bunting’s estimation as the younger man’s precursor has become an accepted element of critical thinking, yet far more remarkable is the fact that, despite MacSweeney’s awareness of this trend and its antiquated (if conventionally legitimising) implications for his work, he decided, instead of completely distancing himself from it, to self-consciously sustain the connection at several levels within his poetry.

From his initial autobiographical comment in *The Boy* to his posthumously published collection *Horses*, MacSweeney can be seen to persistently and evocatively inscribe Bunting, both explicitly and allusively, as an authority and character, and as a presence in his work. And although not as frequently employed as some of the poet’s other leitmotifs (or even as common as the elder man’s citation in MacSweeney’s critical assessment), this trend deserves attention due to its sheer pervasiveness. In only the third poem from his debut, MacSweeney makes reference to Bunting with the rather oblique line: ‘an article on basil torn from the *Scotsman*’ where only the provinciality of the newspaper and the analogous references to ‘byron’ and ‘lorca’ (with similarly omitted capitals) in adjacent lines, suggest that it is the

⁶² Eric Mottram, ‘The British Poetry Revival, 1960-75’, in *New British Poetries: The Scope of the Possible* (Manchester and New York: Manchester University Press, 1993), pp. 15-50 (pp. 37-38).

⁶³ Clive Bush, ‘Parts in the Weal’.

poet and not the herb of which he speaks.⁶⁴ In the same collection, the use of ‘so much on your / fingers in my storm of / cock hair’⁶⁵ (which may be MacSweeney’s explicit take on one of the few commonly criticised lines in Bunting’s *Briggflatts*: ‘his fingers comb / thatch of his manhood’s home’),⁶⁶ and ‘the tidal bore’ (which although tenuous, links to comments he made concerning their journalistic relationship) extend the connection.⁶⁷ In *Fools Gold* (1972) there exists another negative reference in ‘Worn / away with staring at Venus, / he licks his fat, the slumber / of basil’, a harsh and noticeably elided remark whose relevance to the poet is again only inferred from the previous exclusion of the capital from his Christian name.⁶⁸ In his later work allusions to Bunting are ever more overt, although their intent continues to waver provocatively between deference and ridicule, as in ‘Black Torch Sunrise’ where MacSweeney at once affirms the elder’s sagacious wisdom and estrangement from contemporary reality:

Barbiturate environment!

Marshmallow urbanity!

[...]

Bunting translates Catullus

in Wylam

old as the century.⁶⁹

⁶⁴ ‘The Two Questions, The Two Places’, *The Boy*, p. 5. In addition to this ambiguous play on the word ‘basil’, MacSweeney elsewhere exploits the poet’s other moniker in the ‘snow bunting’ which appear in Kielder Forest in two of the poems from *Horses*: ‘Troubled Are These Times’ (p. 11) and ‘Cold Mountain Ode’ (p. 34).

⁶⁵ ‘Such a Lot’, *The Boy*, p. 16.

⁶⁶ Bunting, *Complete Poems*, p. 63.

⁶⁷ ‘The Decision, Finally (for Jeremy Prynne) 4am, March 24 Sparty Lea’, *The Boy*, p. 45. A suggestion reinforced by a later line from *Memos* which echoes this allusion whilst adding another clue as to its subject: ‘Like Wylam salmon male and female we whipped the / Pennine bore’. This reference could feasibly constitute a double barb in pertaining also to W.H. Auden, a mainstream and – some might say – poetic appropriator of the Alston/Allendale landscape whom MacSweeney would certainly have had reason to dislike (‘So quiet tonight I can barely hear the brushing’, *Memos*, p. 16).

⁶⁸ *Fools Gold* [poem 4].

⁶⁹ *Wolf Tongue: Selected Poems 1965-2000* (Tarsset: Bloodaxe Books, 2003), p. 76. Hereafter referred to as *Wolf Tongue*.

Whether as a result of wry self-mythologizing or a genuine aspiration to register the existence of a poetic influence, such allusions remain consistent and are manifest not simply in the insertion of Bunting's name but in recognisable echoes of his poetry. At the end of 'Colonel B' MacSweeney inserts a '(coda)' which begins: 'Betelgeuse. My central star. / Justice as geography of the soul [...] The moon (Beulah) walks Up',⁷⁰ evoking section V of Bunting's *Briggflatts* ('Betelgeuse, / calling behind him to Rigel')⁷¹ and adapting the other poet's stellar terminology with the inclusion of a reference to Blake's mythological world. Similarly, in a poem from *Demons*, MacSweeney again conjures Bunting's major work, perhaps tellingly amidst an evocation of how 'I hope heaven will be': 'miles away from traffic, / and the sonata of the clapping of beasts through clarts',⁷² which is then echoed in 'Rages and Larks' with: 'Heifers clop through shite'.⁷³ In *Ranter*, already reminiscent of *Briggflatts* in its structural relation to the modernist long poem, replete with thematic voyaging and the fusion of geographical locations, he writes 'Broken stiles neglected ditches / clogged with clarts', and then: 'sheepwire stapling / her fells and fields / wild Northumberland / hemmed in' in a form suggestive of Bunting's verse bemoaning the mismanagement of the region by rich landowners.⁷⁴ In 'Saffron Walden Blues' he states 'I imagine Villon / riding through this village / a posse of *flics* at his back', deliberately recalling Bunting's 'Villon' (and thus the elder's time in gaol).⁷⁵ In two unpublished sonnets MacSweeney makes reference to Bunting's celebrated line from section II of *Briggflatts* concerning the nature of their common profession: 'I walk, the most appointed / person in and beyond my time' and

⁷⁰ *Tempers*, p. 212.

⁷¹ Bunting, *Complete Poems*, p. 79.

⁷² 'Your Love Is A Swarm And An Unbeguiled Swanne', *Demons*, p. 84. Other possible allusions to *Briggflatts* occur in MacSweeney's early poem, 'The Last Bud' where he writes: 'And her who is Israfel takes me to / pity through pain' (*The Last Bud*), for Bunting's: 'and the limbs of Israfel [...] whose sign is cirrus' (Bunting, *Complete Poems*, p. 73), and in 'Saffron Walden Blues, at the Pond House' where he notes: 'I belong and am exiled [...] I come from the Chillingham Bull. / I have no latch, not even ivy / to choke the mason's work', pointedly referencing the opening section of Bunting's work (*Boulevard*, p. 41).

⁷³ Archive: BM: 1/20/1.

⁷⁴ *Ranter* p. 28. Both 'Gin the Goodwife Stint' and 'The Complaint of the Morpethshire Farmer' are poems written in Northumbrian dialect and deal with such issues, the latter stating: 'Sheep and cattle are poor men's food, / grouse is sport for the rich; / heather grows where the sweet grass might grow / for the cost of cleaning the ditch'. (Bunting, *Complete Poems*, p. 115).

⁷⁵ *Boulevard*, p. 39.

‘Then I bring / a poet’s true appointment to his calling’.⁷⁶ Elsewhere he at least twice versifies the advice conferred on him and others with: ‘Accuracy is all he said and also compression of language / Words are all we cannot live without’⁷⁷ and ‘again and again the line shortens / the repetitious words’, the latter of which lines especially cogently recalls Bunting’s ‘I Suggest’.⁷⁸

What is manifest both in the shifting tone of MacSweeney’s allusions and his seeming inability to divest himself of them is his struggle with a legacy provoked by numerous early comparisons. His references are characterised by a desire to register a fondness for Bunting’s idiosyncrasies, his role as a Northumbrian icon and even his specialist knowledge (‘Basil knew what flowers were’),⁷⁹ but tempered by an equally powerful need to debunk Bunting’s accepted antecedent status in terms of his own work, to assert his independent authenticity and to exorcise the portentous ghost. As with most dilemmas of influence there are several lofty precursors for this situation, whether we see MacSweeney’s defensiveness as redolent of Bloom’s ‘anxieties’ and his tendency to parody Bunting as inscribing his reputation whilst undermining it⁸⁰ or view his satirical disempowerment of his immediate forebear as a technique enabling him to ‘leap over the parental’ to a geographically or culturally distanced resource ‘remote enough to be more manageable in the quest for [his] own identity’.⁸¹ That MacSweeney frequently twinned his allusions to Bunting with specific notions of place (in

⁷⁶ ‘Mary Bell Sonnets’, ‘The Gift Which Arrived Today’ [70] and [102], Archive: BM: 2/9/1.

⁷⁷ ‘Victory Over Darkness & The Sunne’, *Horses*, p. 29.

⁷⁸ ‘Our Mutual Scarlet Boulevard’, *Boulevard*, p. 74. This line appears in the poem’s ‘Coda’.

⁷⁹ Archive: BM: 1/19/2. ‘15 Per Cent of Every Life Lived’. Such remarks reveal what appear to be a genuine respect on MacSweeney’s part for certain aspects of Bunting’s expertise.

⁸⁰ Harold Bloom, *The Anxiety of Influence* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997). Perhaps the most apposite of Bloom’s examples is that which he draws between Shakespeare and Marlowe, stating: ‘Marlowe haunted Shakespeare, who defensively parodied his forerunner whilst resolving that the author of *The Jew of Malta* would become for him primarily the way *not* to go [...] After *Henry VI*, an ironic inflection almost invariably conditions the Marlovian recalls, and yet many of these are less allusive than they are something else, repetitions perhaps, usually in a finer tone. The fascination with Marlowe remained; one could almost term it a seduction by Marlowe’ (xxii-xxxv).

⁸¹ W.J. Bate: *The Burden of the Past and the English Poet*, 1st paperback edn (Harvard: Harvard University Press, 1991), p. 22. Although Bate discusses the poet’s ‘leapfrogging’ of the immediate precursor in his attempt to discover texts chronologically distanced from him, there seems little reason why in MacSweeney’s case a need to escape the adjacent influence did not manifest in him choosing inspirations that were instead topographically distinct.

Ranter: ‘Wylam to Prudhoe, Bunting and Bewick’,⁸² and in ‘Map, etcetera’: ‘Wylam, / home of engineer, poet / and salmon kyping at the rush’)⁸³ is a similarly evocative device, respectful of Bunting’s synonymy with his region and yet alert to its restricting consequences. As with Ricks’ appraisal of Dryden’s relation to Milton, MacSweeney’s attitude to his antecedent ‘had many strains and strands’, and this is perchance what made Bunting’s presence in his work almost unique.⁸⁴ For in MacSweeney’s thoroughly allusive poetry, where friends, characters and precursors are either unequivocally loved (‘God [...] there is one, you know [...] is called Milton and Blake / and Litherland and Silkin’)⁸⁵ or denounced (‘waiting for Simon’s zooming [...] thought so much of him once, he led the team, / but he is like all of them really [...] Flash in the pan short span man’),⁸⁶ only Pickard – the other component in their relationship – is evoked with similar ambiguities or so wide a spectrum of emotion.

By the time of his writing *Horses*, MacSweeney appears to have, perhaps deliberately, completed his circle of reference, returning once again, although this time in lyrical form, to his much repeated anecdote from the pair’s journalistic encounter:

The tidal causeway at Lindisfarne can be as untrue as you
Just as Basil taught me all those years ago
And he said if you don’t publish correctly the tidal charts
Seamen from Valparaiso and Houston will end up on the Black Middens
Dead on the rocks.⁸⁷

⁸² *Ranter*, p. 26.

⁸³ *Boulevard*, p. 24.

⁸⁴ Christopher Ricks, *Allusion to the Poets* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002). Ricks writes of Dryden: ‘His feelings about Milton sound as though they have many strains and strands: he could write with a sheerly unenvying generosity about Milton’s heroic achievement, but he could also manifest a resistance to Milton which was less than disinterested but was also forgivable in a poet fighting for survival, for breathing-space [...] It was not that he was grudging towards Milton, but he needed room for himself’ (pp. 33-4).

⁸⁵ ‘My Former Darling Country Wrong or Wrong’, *Postcards*.

⁸⁶ ‘No Attention Please’, Archive: BM: 2/3.

⁸⁷ ‘Victory Over Darkness & The Sunne’, *Horses*, pp. 28-9.

Yet even MacSweeney's recitation of his two central Bunting stories, those concerning 'tidal' and 'poetic' advice which he included in the 'autobiography' and maintained in remarkably unvarying form until the end of his career can be seen as another (affectionately?) satirical gibe at Bunting himself. For by re-telling the same inter-establishment story, MacSweeney inevitably recalls the elder's notorious propensity for name-dropping ('You know that my friends are dead, for the most part [...] Pound, Zukofsky, Carlos Williams, the other day, Hugh MacDiarmid')⁸⁸ and his regular reiteration of a yarn concerning W. B. Yeats inviting him to dinner and reciting back to him Bunting's own verse.⁸⁹ This trait further complicates any avowal of influence which MacSweeney may have been taken to imply through his recital of such events. In Bunting's case this penchant for *camarade* allusion is widely regarded as a consequence of his need to reassert his own literary relevance through the reputations of his past acquaintances, or to fulfil a requisite for appeasing expectant audiences with names they wished to hear without the obligation to recall new material. For MacSweeney however, such requirements were not so imperative, and his references to Bunting perform the dual function of affirming a general connection between them whilst undermining assumptions about their relationship by satirising the elder's increasingly absurd mode of self-legitimation, to which he may also have been referring in the *Toad Church* lines: 'The partitions in the café bend a lot when I drink / your pink / memories of a piggish evening with Yeats and Molly Bloom'.⁹⁰

What should be perceptible from the connections summarised above is that Bunting's presence in MacSweeney's verse and its critical appreciation is both consistent and restricted to a few very precise themes. Many of these, including MacSweeney's persistent recounting of Bunting's 'advice', the habitual truisms of their association with the Morden Tower and

⁸⁸ Basil Bunting, 'Keele Recordings', cassette 3B.

⁸⁹ 'he read all the twenty-odd lines of this poem, he spouted them off by heart, and much later again he referred to it, obviously Yeats liked it, so though its early stuff, and not the stuff I've devoted myself to trying to make, it has his sanction [...] And as I read it I can still hear Yeats reciting the last lines there: "we again subside into our catalepsy, dreaming foam, while the dry shore awaits another tide"', 'Keele Recordings', cassette 3B.

⁹⁰ *Toad Church* [20] (1972), Archive: BM: 2/1.

their international renown as North East poets, are abiding and yet largely superficial facts: useful devices in the marketing of MacSweeney's verse but often distracting in terms of its separate appreciation. At least one broad critical tenet, however, does apply to the literary comparison of their work, in that the strongest points of lyrical convergence between the two poets definitively pertain to their delineations of Northumbrian landscapes. This connection is clearly upheld by the fact that MacSweeney's lyrical allusions are repeatedly to Bunting's *Briggflatts*, one of his few key works to deal specifically with that topic; by the thematic similarities in their renditions of the subject (including the use of socio-historical and natural motifs) and by their mutual critical association with Gerald Manley Hopkins, a poet whose conviction led him to pursue 'a language of inspiration that would capture experience afresh'; who revived 'archaisms' and used 'coinages of his own', all practices adopted by these two successors.⁹¹ Yet such similarities, in conjunction with William Wootten's consideration of Bunting's poetic not as 'British' but 'Northumbrian Modernism', are also redolent of a crucial and distorting discrepancy between the two poets' literary resemblance and their wider public correlation.⁹² For whilst the latter takes place on a superficial plateau and is assumed to apply to a broad spectrum of their work, the only substantial evidence of what Bloom terms poetic 'misprision' exists in the comparatively little of either poets' verse to deal principally with the delineation of North East rural topographies.⁹³

One examination to consider this legacy within the boundaries of the work to which it chiefly pertains is Harriet Tarlo's 'Radical Landscapes'. Initially Tarlo appears to be simply

⁹¹ *The Cambridge Guide to Literature in English*, ed. by Ian Ousby (London: Guild Publishing, 1989), p. 477.

⁹² 'Basil Bunting: British Modernism and the Time of the Nation', *The Star You Steer By: Basil Bunting and British Modernism*, ed., James McGonigal & Richard Price (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2000), pp. 17-34 (p. 17).

⁹³ In MacSweeney's oeuvre several 'major', and various smaller poems depict rural Northumbrian landscapes including the trilogy of 'Map' poems from *Boulevard*, *Blackbird*, *Ranter*, *Pearl*, 'Pearl Against The Barbed Wire', some of the *Demons*, 'My Former Darling Country Wrong or Wrong' from *Postcards* and several of the *Horses* lyrics such as 'The Illegal 2CV', yet this is still a relatively meagre percentage. In Bunting's poetry the amount is even smaller (although it may be argued that he was less prolific) and may be seen to include *Briggflatts*, 'At Briggflatts Meeting House', the early works 'Gin the Goodwife Stint' and 'The Complaint of the Morpethshire Farmer', some of *Attis: Or Something Missing* and the late 'Such syllables flicker out of grass' and 'Dentdale conversation'.

reiterating MacSweeney platitudes when she establishes her essay as particularly concerned with ‘poets whose work can be related to that of Basil Bunting [...] who all live in the North of England and [...] acknowledge Bunting as a significant ancestor’.⁹⁴ Yet the generalisations of her introduction are not borne out by the remainder of the article which, in its examination of the continuities between *Briggflatts* and in this case, specifically *Pearl*, constitutes one of the most detailed textual comparisons of the two poets’ pastoral verse in recent criticism. Tarlo notes first that *Pearl* represents ‘a sequence of poems with self-conscious connections to *Briggflatts*’⁹⁵ and proceeds to list parallels between the two which include references to local history (p. 154); the use of compound words or ‘kenning’ (p. 155); a ‘refusal to ignore the unseemly elements of nature’ (p. 161); an awareness ‘of the human presence in the land, both past and present’; a ‘sense of the inhabitants of the environment, be they animal or human’ (p. 162); of ‘industrial and agricultural labour and poverty’ (p. 164) and ‘land “rights” and politics’ (p. 165). She also remarks that: ‘We can see the influence of Bunting [...] incorporating, not just the observed detail of the eye, but also the learned historical and geological fact’ (p. 170). Yet what is evident from Tarlo’s analysis, and what may be gleaned from her use of terms such as ‘sense’ and ‘awareness’, is that the majority of acknowledged parallels between these two sequences centre on elements pertaining to each poet’s regional-historical perspective, and that although they may to some extent be likened rhythmically and syntactically, it is rather the political and humanist ideologies behind their work where the true commonalities lie.

The conspicuous similarities between *Pearl* and *Briggflatts* are particularly visible for several reasons: they occupy analogous positions in each poet’s career; evoke their author’s passionate regard for his individually distinct landscape; utilise memories of formative sexual experience as central motifs and represent maturely developed and personalised assessments

⁹⁴ Harriet Tarlo, ‘Radical Landscapes’, p. 149.

⁹⁵ *Ibid*, p. 153.

of particular place.⁹⁶ Yet whether such links are evocative of a direct progression of stylistic influence from one poet to another of his acquaintance or more to do with the existence of a broader sense of independently evolved identity which resulted from each man's experience of being a socio-politically aware individual developing as a marginalized North Easterner in twentieth-century Britain is more difficult to ascertain. Or, to put the problem another way, whether the traits in MacSweeney's work which are commonly supposed to be indicative of Bunting's influence, the resonant invocations of the Northumbrian Saints; a concern with the sound patterns of local dialects, and allusions to the conflicts and climate which shaped the region's landscape ('Bloodaxe, king of York' in *Briggflatts*;⁹⁷ *Ranter*'s 'Halfden's longboats' and 'Hadrian's leather boot')⁹⁸ were actually dependent upon the poetic exploits of his elder or derived instead from a momentous field of local reference which MacSweeney accessed as a result of his native consciousness? That these two poets may only be plausibly compared in terms of their Northumbrian based poetry is evidence of their use of a common resource, yet rather than supporting their similitude, this traditional realm of their association is actually indicative of both their personal and generational distinctiveness. For, as William Wootten observes of Bunting, each poet is necessarily constructing a 'Northumbria that reflects his own literary tastes' and the sequences *Briggflatts* and *Pearl* are chiefly autobiographies in which 'Northumbrian and northern material is configured around the poet's life and concerns, supplying a personal mythology and a subjective, rather than objective, correlative to them.'⁹⁹

In their use of analogous local motifs a striking contrast exists between Bunting's own majestic validation of Northumbria by way of its Saints ('Columba, Columbanus, as the soil

⁹⁶ Although published after only sixty-six years of Basil Bunting's eighty-five year life, *Briggflatts* is generally held to represent the apex of his literary career and to contain evidence of both the maturation of his poetic philosophies and the discovery of his 'true poetic voice'. *Pearl*, along with *Demons* (published only 3 years before MacSweeney's death) has similarly been regarded as the embodiment of the poet's developed technique and of his acute observational ability to portray both his own personal experience and the beauty and corruption of the world around him.

⁹⁷ *Briggflatts*, *Complete Poems*, p. 64.

⁹⁸ *Ranter*, p. 7.

⁹⁹ 'Basil Bunting and the Time of the Nation', pp. 21-27.

shifts its vest, / Aidan and Cuthbert put on daylight')¹⁰⁰ and MacSweeney's subsequent sense of their desertion: 'Picking up Bede and Cuthbert / on the ham radio [...] wondering why they don't answer back',¹⁰¹ 'Farne - / fuming. surf, in / mighty / region / of kippers / and Bede. / He is / gone'.¹⁰² Where *Briggflatts* asserts the proud agricultural names of those 'fell-born men of precise instep [...] Wilson or Telfer',¹⁰³ their counterparts in *Pearl* represent not local dignity but industrial disintegration: 'Hard hats abandoned in heather [...] Tags / in the rims: Ridley, Marshall, / McKinnon, Smith'.¹⁰⁴ Whilst *Briggflatts* 'ranges the world and time'¹⁰⁵ glorying in the rich cultural diversity of its poet's experiences, referencing the 'Apuan Alps', 'fiddlers above Parma', 'sweltering Crete' and 'desired Macedonia',¹⁰⁶ *Pearl* symbolically rejects it. In MacSweeney's sequence the valued 'world' contains only that which lies within his fundamental sphere 'up here on the rim of the planet',¹⁰⁷ and external geographies remain sparsely acknowledged, contextually negative ('I lost my mind in Sarajevo [...] the filthy bombshell bombhell')¹⁰⁸ and culturally stereotyped ('In the Orient I would be a good servant'):¹⁰⁹ violent and distrusted distractions from the authentic rural territory: 'They have smelled the city perfume from the passing coach'.¹¹⁰ MacSweeney's imagery in the sequence also supports this premise, countering Bunting's classical references with an intense focus on the rudiments of life within the specific environment, and swapping Asian birdlife ('vultures riding on a spiral')¹¹¹ for an accent on domestic items with integral relation to his scene: 'curtains',¹¹² Pearl's 'Woolworth butterfly blue plastic clip',¹¹³ 'spam on Sundays',¹¹⁴ 'Co-op

¹⁰⁰ *Briggflatts, Complete Poems*, p. 75.

¹⁰¹ *Ranter*, p. 6.

¹⁰² 'Tides / clip' (Untitled poem), Archive: BM: 1/17/1.

¹⁰³ *Complete Poems*, p. 79.

¹⁰⁴ 'Pearl Suddenly Awake', *Demons*, p. 18.

¹⁰⁵ Harriet Tarlo, 'Radical landscapes', p. 152.

¹⁰⁶ *Briggflatts, Complete Poems*, pp. 61-81.

¹⁰⁷ 'Pearl in the Snow', Archive: BM: 2/3.

¹⁰⁸ 'Cavalry at Calvary', *Demons*, p. 23.

¹⁰⁹ 'Pearl Alone', *Demons*, p. 22.

¹¹⁰ 'Rake Them From Their Bunks', Archive: BM: 1/17/1.

¹¹¹ *Briggflatts, Complete Poems*, p. 69.

¹¹² 'Mony Ryal Ray', p. 16.

¹¹³ 'Fever', p. 19.

¹¹⁴ 'Pearl Alone', p. 22.

coat'¹¹⁵, 'red mittens'¹¹⁶, 'sheep bones' and 'crisps'.¹¹⁷ MacSweeney's rural North East could be both expansive and fantastical, but it was also less ornately rendered and formally self-conscious than Bunting's: an ingenuousness which contributed to its authenticity.

In many respects, Bunting's North East was his own archaic and immovable concept, for he was, as Colls and Lancaster describe in *Geordies: Roots of Regionalism*, one of 'Those "real" Northumbrians [who] see themselves as the inheritors of eleventh century Boernican kingdoms, are not likely to be much fussed by yet another level of identity overlaying all the other levels which have gone since 1018'.¹¹⁸ Like Auden, whom Sid Chaplin observed had "'Obviously little or no feeling for folk – I doubt if he'd ever made friends with a Weardale or Alston Lead Miner'",¹¹⁹ Bunting preferred to populate his landscape with those consigned to history: with mythical warriors and kings or with symbolic rural characters rather than address its living populace, all of which went against MacSweeney's social ethics. In Bunting's early verse the bucolic issues are enforced emigration and the usurping of the land ('Must ye bide, my good stone house / to keep a townsman dry'),¹²⁰ but they are matters in relation to which his middle-class status makes him little more than an empathetic observer. In MacSweeney's time an essentially converse, but still comparable, situation had been greatly intensified by the modern increase in urban–rural migration, provoking issues which his social indignation and love for the unadulterated landscape caused him to bitterly internalise: 'bijou conversion',¹²¹ 'from the edge of the roaring bypass'¹²², 'wire, wire, wire'.¹²³ The closest theoretical position

¹¹⁵ 'Pearl and Barry Pick Rosehips For The Good Of The Country', p. 26.

¹¹⁶ 'Those Sandmartin Tails', p. 27.

¹¹⁷ 'Pearl's Poem Of Joy And Treasure', p. 31.

¹¹⁸ *Geordies: Roots of Regionalism*, ed. by Robert Colls & Bill Lancaster, 2nd edn (Newcastle upon Tyne: Northumbria University Press, 2205), xi [first pub. 2001]. Hereafter referred to as Colls/Lancaster.

¹¹⁹ Alan Myers & Robert Forsythe, *W.H. Auden: Pennine Poet* (Nenthead: North Pennines Heritage Trust, 1999), p. 23. The authors note that Auden was unaware of Chaplin, and when introduced to him 'responded: 'Oh, I see, a regional author' (p. 23).

¹²⁰ 'The Complaint of the Morpethshire Farmer', *Complete Poems*, p. 114. In fairness to Bunting, he did recognise the limited relevance of such poems and remarked: 'I had no sooner written [the above] than it was out of date, for the Forestry Commission came and took all the land, and drained it, and, then the war came, and all the farmers got rich instead of being extremely poor' ('Keele Recordings', cassette 3B).

¹²¹ 'Cushy Number', *Wolf Tongue*, p. 320.

¹²² 'No Such Thing', *Demons*, p. 15.

¹²³ 'Pearl Against The Barbed Wire', *Demons*, p. 69.

to this relation is perhaps Bloom's revisionary ratio 'Tessera', where 'A poet antithetically "completes" his precursor, by so reading the parent-poem as to retain its terms but to mean them in another sense, as though the precursor had failed to go far enough'.¹²⁴ Yet even this does not explain the link, for although the differences between Bunting and MacSweeney's rural poetry are exacerbated both by the former's purposefully archaic stance and the latter's defiantly anarchic one, the variance in their respective attitudes demands that MacSweeney's pastoral lyrics be regarded partly as an updated version of a previous form, but more so as his very personal reaction to a drastically changed landscape.

Today we are used to classic writers from the North East, such as Basil Bunting and Barry MacSweeney; but this is a new phenomenon; whether the reason is the difficulty north-easterners experienced in manipulating southern English (or indeed in having cultural faith in their own speech) or something more intricate¹²⁵

MacSweeney's personalised revision of Bunting's notions and the distinctions which underlie assumed commonalities between the two can also be located in each poet's specific use and understanding of dialects. For whilst these poets have been habitually equated for their stringent beliefs in, and omnipresent concern with, the significance of their native oral culture – key for MacSweeney because Northern language 'is longer lasting, it's durable, it's harder, it's springier, it's more elemental, it comes out of all sorts of historical, geographical and social conflicts',¹²⁶ – it was also a subject on which they held distinctly differing views. While MacSweeney, as inferred from his 'autobiography', was usually defiantly 'Geordie' in his literary self-representation, Bunting was equally defiantly not so, and in accordance with his cultivated 'Northumbrian' identity strongly distinguished between these two idioms. In an interview with Peter Bell he termed Geordie 'a bastard language [...] a mixture mainly of South-Northumbrian with the Irish that was brought in by the labourers who came first to dig

¹²⁴ Bloom, *The Anxiety of Influence*, p. 14.

¹²⁵ Andrew Duncan, 'faberanth', <http://www.pinko.org/30.html> [accessed 10 August 2007]

¹²⁶ *Poetry Information*, p. 33.

canals, then to build railways, and finally settle down largely in the coal mines': an analysis which as neatly encompasses MacSweeney's reasons for embracing his dialect (it being tied to his blue-collar Irish heritage and Allendale upbringing) as it does Bunting's own reasons for rejecting it.¹²⁷ The rather pedantic nature of this vernacular segregation is characteristic of Bunting's deliberately antagonistic persona; that it touches on issues of class is symptomatic of his tendency towards snobbery, yet the distinction is also redolent of a generational schism between the two poets which influenced their perceptions of their own regional identities. For while the elder refused to connect himself lyrically, or even ancestrally, with the seething mass of the modern city ('When I was born Scotswood wasn't Geordie. Geordie stopped with Newcastle'), founding his 'regionality' on an ancient, incorporeal kingdom, the younger poet inverted this position.¹²⁸ Taking as his early focus the region's modern 'capital', Newcastle, MacSweeney addressed all aspects of his province and saw, in the multifaceted textures of the existing North East, an analogy for the divergent elements of his composite identity.

It has been shown that the main points of convergence in the work of MacSweeney and Bunting and the closest instances of poetic phraseology in their verse occur in relation to their depictions of the rural North East, a circumstance which suggests that they should only reasonably be compared for their renditions of a common regional consciousness. Yet there may be more reason to refute the traditional assessment of their relationship than even this. For what is not often fully considered by the advocates of the Bunting as 'mentor' theory, is that as a result of his 1960s renaissance, the elder poet may almost be regarded as much as MacSweeney's contemporary as he was his precursor – their both having been energised by the activism of the 'Revival' and concurrently propelled towards literary renown. Just as Bunting was completing his major work, MacSweeney was starting one of his own (*The Boy* was hugely well received) and for a decade or more they were simultaneously writing verse.

¹²⁷ 'Keele Recordings', cassette 7A.

¹²⁸ It is useful to note that Bunting never mentioned Newcastle by name in his verse.

It is interesting with this in mind to evaluate some of the poets' work from this particular era and to examine not just the concurrence between their satirical defences of Tom Pickard: the elder's: 'I want to wash when I meet a poet. / They're Reds, addicts, / all delinquents. / What you write is rot' with the other's apparently contemporaneous 'I too want to call Tom Pickard "a long-haired / Scruffy, parasitic bastard" / I want to call John Silkin a "bearded egotist"', but to look at some of their pastoral lyrics as well.¹²⁹ To place Bunting's 'Look how clouds dance / under the wind's wing, and leaves / delight in transience'¹³⁰ against MacSweeney's 'trees dance by themselves / and don't recognise time';¹³¹ the elder's 'some steep pool / to plodge or dip / and silent taste / with all my skin'¹³² with his junior's 'We plodge in eddies / of Love';¹³³ and view Basil's 'Light pelts hard now my sun's low, / it carves my stone as hail mud',¹³⁴ alongside Barry's 'quilts of rain lashing into / peat, a light-handed wind picking / drops'.¹³⁵ These comparable, loco-descriptive images, which are not the closest examples of textual resemblance to be found within these two poets' work, are all instances in which MacSweeney's line predates that of his 'poet mentor', a curiosity which suggests that although Bunting's proximity may well have affected MacSweeney's early compositions, his regional consciousness and the ability to elucidate it was already inherent in his technique.

Peter Manson has observed that 'MacSweeney is one of those writers whose work becomes [...] more coherent the more of it you read' because it contains elements that 'recur in poems written years apart, with a cumulative effect'.¹³⁶ And indeed, this is an absolutely

¹²⁹ 'What the Chairman Told Tom', *Complete Poems*, p. 40 and 'On the Apology Owed Tom Pickard', *Boulevard*, p. 11. The comparison of these two poems is certainly interesting when one considers that they originate from almost exactly the same period: Bunting's (in *Complete Poems*) dated 1965 and MacSweeney's located in a section of *Boulevard* designated 'Poems 1965: 1968' and according to its author 'the earliest poem in the book [...] one in fact, which Hutchinson's rejected' (*Poetry Information*, p. 24). The fact that these poems were inspired by similar events, however, is not in itself evidence of *coterie*.

¹³⁰ 'At Briggflatts Meeting House', *Complete Poems*, p. 145 (circa 1975).

¹³¹ *Brother Wolf* [12] (Brighton: Turret Books, 1972). Hereafter referred to as *Brother Wolf*.

¹³² 'Stones Trip Coquet Burn', *Complete Poems*, p. 144 (circa 1970).

¹³³ 'We', *The Boy*, p. 21 (circa pre 1968).

¹³⁴ 'Such syllables flicker out of grass', *Complete Poems*, p. 199 (circa 1972).

¹³⁵ '& The Biggest Bridge is Forty Feet Long', *The Boy*, p. 31 (circa 1968).

¹³⁶ 'Barry MacSweeney, Hellhound Memos', *Object Permanence* 1, (1994), <http://www.manson88.freemove.co.uk/Revs.htm#macs> [accessed 10 August 2007]

justifiable statement, with the possible exception of MacSweeney's references and allusions to Basil Bunting. For whilst these are certainly consistent, they are barely more elucidatory as to the poet's own estimation of this influence following their comprehensive scrutiny than they were from his initial autobiography. Where one seeks evidence of Bunting's tutorship in MacSweeney's verse, there is often only an echo or impression (sometimes affectionately sardonic) of the man himself, and on occasion, scarcely even that: 'attend your fresh horizon / servants of such final need / old as this century is'.¹³⁷ The only statements MacSweeney ever made regarding this poetic inheritance – if we discount the sweeping ambiguity of remarks like 'He taught me a lot of things' and 'he was a great bloke' – concern Bunting's teachings on condensing the poetic line: 'he meant real economy, not just writing the poem and then going through seeing which words are unnecessary – but from the beginning, the whole thing, is drawn tightly together'.¹³⁸ Yet his actual verse is less suggestive of this practice than of a deeper, and yet far more intangible emotional consequence, when in the midst of a poem which could hardly be less economical, he declares: 'I want to run before / the moon, I want to swing on my starres by Bunting, garlanded with squat': leaving the capital intact and the allusion clear.¹³⁹ The answer to this riddle, as implied in the poet's 'autobiography' which at once invites and rejects the influence, is clearly complex, but perhaps – as suggested in his use of Bunting and Pickard as locative rather than literary signifiers in his work ('Newcastle poets') – it lies in the fact that this was more a regional than poetic stimulus. For even though MacSweeney's lyrical responses to the rural North East drew far more deeply on a range of other, diverse literary precursors, Bunting's ghost never quite disappears from his work.

¹³⁷ *Blackbird*.

¹³⁸ *Poetry Information*, pp. 22-36. This is of course the only definitive point of connection that he made in his initial 'autobiography' in 1968.

¹³⁹ 'John Bunyan to Johnny Rotten', *Demons*, p. 105.

Chapter Two: Exploring MacSweeney's 'Sparty Lea Locale'

Barry MacSweeney's *Pearl* (1997), his self-designated volume of 'pure lyrical innocence' composed 'between times of ravaging' is often held within his oeuvre to exhibit the closest stylistic resemblance to Bunting's *Briggflatts* and to contain the densest and arguably most resonant example of a regional sense in the younger man's work.¹ Yet *Pearl* is also indicative of MacSweeney's individuality as a lyricist concerned with place and identity. For whilst Bunting disassociates himself from his poetic landscapes by interring them in archaisms, MacSweeney consciously entwines his lyrical persona – and the dynamics of his relationship with the poems' eponymous character – with the spirit of the territory itself: 'I traipsed around in belting sleet / the glades and glens / searching my ghost of Pearl'.² Where Bunting denies that his images are coloured by private emotion, the younger man uses precisely this impetus to conjure the quintessence of his geography, and where the elder poet's landmarks resonate with a broad historical timbre ('Hedgehope', 'Lindisfarne' and 'York')³ MacSweeney's are frequently private and microcosmic ('Dirt Pot' and 'Carr Shield'). The regularity with which *Pearl* is cited in MacSweeney's critical analysis denotes the academic regard in which it is held, and Douglas Clark has proposed that MacSweeney is 'most typically good when talking about Sparty Lea, his homeland.'⁴ Yet in order to assess such a statement and to trace the development of this particular sense of place throughout his work, it is critical to understand both the perspectives and poetic techniques which distinguish his landscapes from those of his

¹ MacSweeney, *Demons* (back jacket). That MacSweeney composed this abstract himself is denotative of his tendency to self-mythologize.

² 'Cavalry at Calvary', *Demons*, p. 23.

³ *Briggflatts*, *Complete Poems*, pp. 61-81. *Briggflatts* itself contains surprisingly few locations relevant to the poem's title and only 'Garsdale' and 'Hawes' along with the river 'Rawthey' at the beginning of the poem come close to the specifics MacSweeney uses in *Pearl*. 'Briggflatts' is only the title and does not appear in the poem.

⁴ Douglas Clark, 'A Lifetime of Poetry'. Clark is apparently referring to MacSweeney's poetic, psychological or supposed familial 'homeland' as his link to Sparty Lea was not of birth, although his very use of the word denotes MacSweeney's achievement in portraying it as such.

‘old mentor’ and to possess a notion of the limits and minutiae of this very specific territory: an arena which might justifiably be characterized as MacSweeney’s ‘Sparty Lea locale’.

Mapping:

If it is to be legitimately claimed, as Ian MacMillan has surmised in a review of *Demons*, that MacSweeney’s *Pearl* did for Sparty Lea what Bunting did for (and in) *Briggflatts* in terms of locating its physical existence within the international literary consciousness, then it must be accepted that each site was placed ‘on the map’ in a very different way.⁵ In perhaps his most purposeful prose testimony concerning his lyrics’ geographical location, the poet exemplifies the precise and systematic way-marking processes at work within his poems, stating:

The physical setting of this entire lyrical sequence is the high lead-mining country of a remote part of the Northumbrian border country near Cumberland and Durham. It is on the East Allen River by Allenheads, Alston and Nenthead. It is spellbindingly beautiful.⁶

This locale then, is intentionally strict: formed as the result of a perceptual stance in relation to the topography which not only foregrounds issues of industry and emotion, but uses a geographical precision that suggests its author’s desire to preclude any misinterpretation of the area discussed. What is further apparent from MacSweeney’s locative statement and from the poems themselves, is that his intention in *Pearl* is not just to inscribe obscure landmarks by inserting their names at random, but to provide them – again for the purposes of accuracy – with a relational identity, both to each other and to the wider regional context. This form of mapping is clearly apparent in the poet’s precursory use of ‘Northumbrian’, ‘Cumberland’ and ‘Durham’ before ‘Allenheads, Alston and Nenthead’ in the statement above, and also in an earlier definition he gave of Sparty Lea’s position: ‘It’s in the Hexham Valley which is 35

⁵ McMillan wrote that *Pearl* succeeds in putting ‘Allendale, high in the North of England, on the map’, ‘More Hyphens, Please!’, *Poetry Review* 87.4.

⁶ ‘*The Book of Demons*, 1997’, *Don’t Ask Me What I Mean: Poets in their own Words*, Picador, 2003, p. 168.

miles west of Newcastle. It's up on the Pennines, just before you come to the top [...] at Hartfell and Alston, so you look down into Keswick and Penrith'.⁷ Similarly, MacSweeney's referencing in the poems contains several concentric layers, including both a focussed central arena, and a related or regionally contextual outer sphere, which are used in combination to demarcate his specific geography. Within such a framework the designations 'Allenheads',⁸ 'Blanchland', 'Leadgate',⁹ 'Alston', 'Nenthead',¹⁰ 'Killhope and Cushat',¹¹ represent the inner and thus more intimately known and commonly used zone, whilst larger conurbations such as 'Haltwhistle',¹² 'Prudhoe' and 'Consett',¹³ are provided for more familiar reference.¹⁴

In 'Radical Landscapes' Harriet Tarlo notes that as with Bunting this 'naming process is also a need to register places that are frequently marginalized: once a name is stated, a place cannot be denied or eclipsed'.¹⁵ Yet for MacSweeney this practice derived not only from a need to assert the identity of a peripheral locale, but also from a wish to establish literary definition for a place with which he felt a deep and hugely passionate connection. To extract an inventory of the place names from a single lyrical sequence may appear a somewhat simplistic basis upon which to pivot a discussion of MacSweeney's rural landscapes with reference to his entire literary output, yet it is also a practical way of establishing that it was not primarily a sense of Northumberland but of this very specific arena that was central to

⁷ *Poetry Information*, p. 27. MacSweeney's use of 'Hartfell' requires some elucidation, for although his citation of it here clearly places it in the Sparty locale – thus proscribing that we take his reference in *Brother Wolf* ('july wind on Hartfell' [7]) to allude to the same site, it has added significance in that the more renowned Hartfell near Moffatt in Scotland was purportedly the seat of Merlin.

⁸ 'Mony Ryal Ray', *Demons*, p. 16.

⁹ 'No Buses to Damascus', p. 17.

¹⁰ 'Cavalry at Cavalry', p. 23.

¹¹ 'Those Sandmartin Tails', p. 27. 'Cushat' (meaning 'dove or wild pigeon') is an ambiguous Northumbrian designation in MacSweeney's work, referring either to Cushat Law in the Cheviot Hills, or if used (as here) without the 'Law' appendage then to the lesser known 'Cushat Hill' within the Sparty Lea locale.

¹² 'Bare Feet in Marigolds', *Wolf Tongue*, p. 321.

¹³ 'Pearl in the Silver Morning', *Wolf Tongue*, p. 323.

¹⁴ Followed by the far less frequently used (at least in MacSweeney's 'rural' verse) but much more widely recognisable designations of 'Newcastle' and 'Carlisle'; 'North', 'Northumbria' and 'Northumberland' in order to differentiate from the even more outlying 'South'.

¹⁵ p. 153.

much of his poetry, and increasingly crucial to his sense of identity.¹⁶ What MacSweeney provides in the remarkably sustained focus of *Pearl*'s twenty-two poems, is a series of named locations that collectively comprise a traceable cartographical definition of the landscape he consistently identified as emotionally imperative. It affords the reader a set of reference points, including not only place names ('Nenthead, Alston and beyond')¹⁷ but rivers ('stones of the Eden to the west')¹⁸ locally resonant details ('The Grapes') and more, which serve as topographical benchmarks by which to identify and assess other examples of northern rural imagery in both his previous and subsequent poetry.¹⁹ Such detailed linguistic cartography and the use of additional explanatory markers ('the East Allen River' and 'high lead-mining country') indicate both the poet's assumption of his audience's ignorance of the locale and his burgeoning pursuit of a fastidious and multi-dimensional descriptive technique.

MacSweeney's career-long experimentation with diverse poetic styles means that the density of specific locational referencing in his work also varies enormously, necessarily ensuring that some of his texts lend themselves more easily and profitably than others to an examination of his construction of a regional sense. It is also evident that – broadly speaking – his use of place names relating to this rural nucleus (and particularly to what we might regard as 'inner zone') appears to increase in relation to the maturity of the work, so whilst *The Boy* (1968) contains only a handful of references ('before Sammy the poacher / ever tramped Killop',²⁰ and 'snowy hills / between the Allen and Tyne')²¹, later collections such as *Ranter* (1985), *Demons* (1997), *Horses* (2004) and the poems 'Lucifer' and 'My Former Darling Country' from *Postcards* (1998) are saturated with them. Daniel James suggests that such a trend may perhaps be seen as 'consistent with a man reflecting on approaching death,

¹⁶ MacSweeney's sense of a 'regional' as opposed to a 'national' identity does play a significant role in his poetry and is discussed in Chapter III.

¹⁷ 'Pearl at 4am', *Demons*, p. 32.

¹⁸ 'Pearl Says', *Demons*, p. 14.

¹⁹ 'Mony Ryal Ray', *Demons*, p. 16.

²⁰ 'On the Gap Left after Leaving', *The Boy*, p. 6. The use of 'Killop' here is assumed to be a phonetic representation of the dialect pronunciation of 'Killhope', a mining area near Sparty Lea.

²¹ 'Song', *The Boy*, p. 38.

[as] he returned constantly to images of purity that radiated from his childhood – the borage, the tumblestones, the argent stars and ox-cheek tea’,²² all of which are specifically associated in his poetry with the character of Pearl and the Sparty Lea locale. Yet whether melancholic nostalgia or simply a maturely developed confidence in the poetic legitimacy of his privately significant landscapes was responsible for this augmentation, it is equally necessary to remain aware of earlier or isolated references where they occur in his work. For lines such as: ‘At Sparty Lea the trees don’t want Orpheus’ in *Brother Wolf* (8) are in themselves testament to the enduring nature of this topography within MacSweeney’s consciousness, and evidence of its continued presence, both subtle and overt within his writing.

In order to establish *Pearl* as the concentrated manifestation of a specific mode of locational referencing that may be traced throughout MacSweeney’s work it is necessary to assess his use of locative indices in both his previous and subsequent poems, amongst which certain patterns are extant. Within the poet’s initial publications there exists a definite North East bias, but it is one as yet unfocussed, conveying a general sense of the region demarcated through the use of more nationally familiar sites. This is exemplified in *Boulevard* by the sequence of ‘Map’ poems that constitute MacSweeney’s first devoted attempt to provide a historically detailed and personally relevant portrait of his province, using situating allusions to ‘Hexham’, ‘Corbridge’, ‘Ovingham’, ‘Wylam’, ‘Blaydon’, ‘Newcassel’, ‘Bamburgh’ and ‘Durham’.²³ Yet even in earlier poems where this wider notion of the realm predominates, the poet’s emotional lure is occasionally evident in lines such as ‘Sparty Lea cemetery / lies by the Allen / willows cleared / shallows dragged, / fish take night for home’.²⁴ In anticipation of *Pearl* there exists in ‘Black Torch Sunrise’: ‘Allendale and Nenthead fells’; in *Blackbird*

²² Daniel James, ‘Barry MacSweeney’, *Guardian*, 30 May 2000, Letters to the Editor, p. 25.

²³ ‘Map, etcetera’ & ‘Map, wall to wall’, *Boulevard*, pp. 24-29. The first (‘Map, etcetera’) follows the course of the River Tyne from Hexham to Newcastle and Tynemouth citing places and people of interest (to the poet) on the way; the second (‘Map, where the year ends’) focuses on the Allendale valley/s as revisited by the poet as adult, and discusses land ownership and the New Year rituals performed at Allendale; whilst the third (‘Map, wall to wall’), charts the eastern coast of the region, from Bamburgh to Alnmouth; Newcastle and Durham through its historical upheavals: the title implying both Celtic and Civil War intrusions.

²⁴ ‘Map, where the year ends’, *Boulevard*, p. 26.

‘Hartfell grasses’, feldspar at Sparty Lea’, ‘source of the Allen’ and ‘Allendale rosehip’ and in *Ranter* ‘Allendale’s pryncedom’, ‘climber of Killhope’, ‘Rookhope to Dirt Pot’, ‘Dove Pool to Allenheads’ and ‘pride of Sparty Lea’. MacSweeney’s later poetry then evinces his mounting use of such designations with ‘just like Sparty’, ‘after lunch in Alston and down from the wilderness [...] Dirt Pot’, ‘Station Bank, Hexham’, ‘Alston lunchtime’, ‘from Burnhope Reservoir to Carr Shield down’, ‘all the way from Coalcleugh down the great rivers’ and ‘Killhope Wheel by the recovery farmhouse’.²⁵ This selection is notable for both a degree of repetition, and for the fact that this list of names, which will mean little to those unfamiliar with the locale, denotes an area of approximately only fifteen miles square

Both the specificity of MacSweeney’s inner topography and his intimate knowledge of its physical composition become even more apparent on examining the metaphoric contexts in which he places some of his identified locations. In ‘My Former Darling Country Wrong or Wrong’ for example, he laments: ‘My God other than me / you are so far from Carr Shield / you are in Cowshill / and you do not know me’.²⁶ This implies the existence of a great division and yet speaks of a physical distance of barely five miles. Critically, however, the stated locations are separated by a regional border and also by a considerable ridge on the hillside, ensuring that both ‘Cowshill’, and subsequently God, are located outside the poet’s reachable sphere.²⁷ Likewise, in ‘Pearl Says’ MacSweeney juxtaposes his protagonist’s simultaneous perception of the limitations of her patrolled territory with her awareness of the surroundings that she is able to observe from her boundary vantage point:

Down from the rain-soaked law

²⁵ *Wolf Tongue*, p. 76, *Blackbird*, *Ranter*, pp. 11-38, ‘I am Lucifer’ [II] from *Postcards*, ‘Lucifer’ from *Postcards*, ‘My Former Darling Country Wrong or Wrong’ from *Postcards*, ‘Terrible Changes’ from *Horses*, p. 23, respectively.

²⁶ *Postcards*.

²⁷ Although only around four and a half miles apart, Carr Shield is in Northumberland whilst Cowshill is over the border into County Durham. This division, however, is not consistently binding in MacSweeney’s work, as he does cite other locations in the Allendale vicinity that are located in both County Durham and in Cumbria, including Alston and Rookhope.

and the rim of the world
 where even on misty nights
 I can see the little lights
 of Penrith and Kendal and, yes,
 Appleby'.²⁸

Pearl's westward gaze is later explicated as resulting from familial concerns ('dad / long gone to Cumberland') with half-allusion to MacSweeney's own peripheral – although in this sequence continually portentous – consciousness of his own paternal Irish heritage: 'Donegal sleet spoke to our faces uniquely'.²⁹ Inter-locational dynamics therefore constitute analogous indices of emotional tension for each, and are recurring motifs in *Pearl* as the girl practices her enunciation by reciting the names of places she cannot go ('Appleby, Penrith, Shap')³⁰ and both characters look incessantly towards the West: to Cumbria, Ireland and (pointedly for the American influenced MacSweeney) to the USA. Significantly, though, it is a sense of (for Pearl) resented and yet luxurious isolation, and the impossibility of traversing the division between the inhabited interior and distantly viewed external arenas which remains vital.

Whilst MacSweeney's sequential designations undoubtedly develop a tangible notion of his poems' setting, it is unlikely that they were intended to munificently unlock this private realm for his readers' consumption. For the poet's very naming of these obscure North East hamlets and their surrounding laws, streams and fells is as redolent of his wish to assert the landscape's remote and private nature as it is of a desire to publicise it. The sheer depth of his description deliberately implies his possession of a rare and privileged knowledge through which he is able to assert the authenticity of his connection to the terrain:

²⁸ 'Pearl Says', *Demons*, p. 14. The 'law' in question is the 673m high Killhope, significantly located on the Durham/Northumberland border.

²⁹ 'Those Sandmartin Tails', *Demons*, p. 27.

³⁰ 'Pearl's Poem of Joy and Treasure', *Demons*, p. 31.

Peewits in their half-forgotten place.

But not by me: I will remember their names and yours

and ours completely forever.³¹

Yet this situation is more complex, for in establishing himself as representative and guardian, MacSweeney must reconcile a peculiarly North Eastern dialectic between his wish to convey the locale's unique and much-loved characteristics and to shield it from outside intrusion.³² This dilemma impels him to include sites such as the rhythmically and alliteratively rendered 'Leaning on the lichen on the Leadgate Road', only to deny them any contextual elucidation. Possible way-markers are turned into assertions of his own familiarity with the province over that of the general reader.³³ In extreme instances, MacSweeney's designations are so intimate as to have relevance only for the protagonists themselves ('Blackbird Ford / named by princes Bar and Paul of Sparty Lea')³⁴ whilst others such as 'St John's Chapel' are left deliberately generic.³⁵ That many of the poet's later and largely unpublished 'Mary Bell Sonnets' (1998) contain increasingly obscure rural locations: 'Lamb's Head [...] / into the Cowhorse Hush [...] Riddlehamhope Moor, Beldon Burn [...] West Blackdene Pasture' [55] 'All the way to Groove Rake [...] High Blue Row, Hartley Mere, Roughside, Slag Hill, Clarty Gap' [56], is an intriguing development in his work, indicative perhaps of his confidence, but also of his need to define and thus inscribe his territory, and to claim it as his own.³⁶

³¹ 'Pearl's Puck Wonder – Ode', Archive: BM: 2/7.

³² Northumberland's longstanding status as Britain's least visited National Park places its proud inhabitants in an unfortunate quandary over whether to encourage others to appreciate its beauty or to keep it for themselves.

³³ 'No Buses to Damascus', *Demons*, p. 17. The line is also a wonderful example of MacSweeney's song-style lyrics and tongue-in-cheek reference to George Formby's 'leaning on a lamppost'.

³⁴ Ibid.

³⁵ 'Lost Pity', *Horses*, p. 32. The line which contains this designation is set apart from the other two larger stanzas which constitute the poem, giving it the feeling of being disconnected, both textually and also geographically from the far more specific locations in the remainder of the piece.

³⁶ 'Mary Bell Sonnets', Archive: BM 2/9/1. The numbers given in brackets are those of the cited sonnets.

Delimiting:

One explanation for the narrow boundaries of MacSweeney's central topography may be located in his originally youthful experience of the landscape, for the locale can essentially be regarded as a child's exploratory sphere, necessarily constrained by the restricted means of investigation available to a working-class pre-teen in the mid-1960s. Indications as to the poet's principal mode of traversing the land occur in his early work with mentions of taking 'off our heavy overcoats'³⁷ and 'tramped Killop'³⁸ and continue through to *Demons*, where he states 'I walk alive alone in Alston', 'we dawdled in the bronze-leaved [...] sleeves of the sike paths',³⁹ asks 'Will we be allowed another trample through mud?',⁴⁰ avers 'I will walk where the plover walks',⁴¹ and describes his former self (through the eyes of Pearl) as 'worn out with wandering, map-reading / the laws and lanes and trails'⁴² and in his own estimation: 'Feldspar finder, tickler of wild brown trout, bridger of burns', all of which evoke the exhaustive enthusiasms of the adventuring child.⁴³ Yet there is a more ominous aspect to this gloriously knowable world, for unlike the poet who can – and eventually does – choose to surpass the boundaries of the Sparty locale, his companion Pearl is inextricably bound to the terrain, both practically by her familial poverty and poetically through her creator's direct associations between her and the land: 'I am Pearl, queen of the dale'.⁴⁴ Constrained also in the majority of the poet's work by perpetual childhood, Pearl encapsulates the essence and determines the crucial limitations of the locale; limitations which are constantly reiterated, and necessarily analogous with her own: 'I stand on the top road and bow / in sleet'; 'She has tramped with

³⁷ 'The Margin', *The Boy*, p. 44.

³⁸ 'On the Gap Left after Leaving' [I], *The Boy*, p. 6.

³⁹ 'John Bunyan to Johnny Rotten', *Demons*, p. 103.

⁴⁰ 'Tom In The Market Square Outside Boots', *Demons*, p. 99.

⁴¹ 'Himself Bright Starre Northern Within', *Demons*, p. 79.

⁴² 'Pearl Suddenly Awake', *Demons*, p. 18.

⁴³ 'Sweeno Sweeno', *Demons*, p. 89.

⁴⁴ 'Pearl's Utter Brilliance', *Demons*, p. 13. Pearl's only transport or means of exceeding the perimeters of her sphere other than walking being 'Noble's trailer' ('Cavalry at Calvary') and 'the Allenheads bus' ('Mony Ryal Ray')

her cleft to the law, soaked cairn'; 'I lap and soak my whistle at the law's rim'; 'Pearl on the law, hair lashed backward, / facing the great west wind / from Alston and Nenthead'.⁴⁵

The child-like voyaging through the landscape's minutia and the sense of possession founded on knowledge which energises these descriptions, stem from Sparty's construction in and colouration by MacSweeney's youthful memory. Yet despite his repeated returns to the region during adult life, the perimeters of this poetic sphere not only remained faithful to the domain of his primary experience, but appeared to contract and intensify in correlation with the development of his verse. So that despite its superficial similarities with *Briggflatts*, *Pearl* can also be seen as its converse, rejecting the poet's maturely gained experience of the world in favour of a regression towards the simplified realm of childhood. The *Pearl* poems evince the poet's concern with local humanitarian specifics, and textual space is awarded primarily to elements with urgent consequences for the landscape and the protagonists' existence within it: the need for food ('I'd like a square meal daily'), employment ('will I find a workshop'), fuel ('chips if there is coal') and the meteorological conditions which prescribe life in such an environment: 'soaked in sleet, sliding / in snow beneath a raft of sighs'.⁴⁶ Furthermore, MacSweeney's spectacularly emotive natural description not only betrays his familiarity with his subject, but animates topography with its own richly distinct and thus sovereign identity. It is an arena dominated by undulating moorland; simultaneously vibrant and barren; devoid of trees except along roadsides or in small copses with large areas given over to sheep farming and few refuges from the ravages of the weather: 'a long-grassed, wind-moved world

⁴⁵ 'Pearl Says', *Demons*, p. 14, 'Fever', *ibid*, p. 19, 'Pearl Alone', *ibid*, p. 22, 'Cavalry at Calvary', *ibid*, p. 23. Although there are occasional references in MacSweeney's work to a mature version of Pearl, her main function is as childhood companion and pre-pubescent first love, and it is in this guise that she predominantly appears.

⁴⁶ 'Dark Was The Night And Cold Was The Ground', p. 25, 'The Shells Her Auburn Hair Did Show', p. 20, 'Pearl Alone', p. 22, 'Pearl's Utter Brilliance', p. 13. Andrew Crozier has written: 'More than he detested the destruction of communities witnessed in the last two decades, he loathed its impact on individual lives, whose vulnerability he already understood. Posited against social and personal crises were exalted recollections of a natural world of plants, creatures and the elements.' ('Barry MacSweeney', *Guardian*).

/ under this cobalt sky'.⁴⁷ This notion of Sparty as 'world' in itself denotes a sense of rural insularity which was both the cornerstone and undoing of many such communities, and which underlines the locale's metaphoric role as a foil for his own character: a fragile and complex, but stubbornly self-contained arena valued for the separateness of its inward-looking identity.

This dogged emphasis on the fundamentals, the pursuit of basic subsistence in a wild and unsophisticated place, again recalls James' notion of the poet's regression towards images of purity due to his awareness of his own mortality, but it is also significant that these images should be insistently focussed into one restricted geographical area. Perhaps the determinedly constrained microcosm of *Pearl* can be seen as the poetic manifestation of a desire voiced by MacSweeney in a much earlier work, to be in possession of 'a unit so small that I can span it in one / go, in a single drunken lurch, delicate / and strong in intent. And not to fall quarter / way across and graze my heart', and that in this sequence, set in its controlled and limited expanse, he finally achieved his longed for 'puddle's calm'.⁴⁸ Plainly here, and elsewhere in his work, boundaries are important, and at several points in his poetry MacSweeney confesses their limiting or prohibitive properties for those trapped by circumstance within a particular arena: 'I cannot cross that mossy path / though in my head I always will.'⁴⁹ Yet his poetry also proffers a conviction that Harriet Tarlo identifies in the work of Colin Simms, in that it 'distinguishes between political and geographical boundaries, ultimately resenting the human imposition of map boundaries, though not the cultural differences, between peoples.'⁵⁰ So that there is a far stronger sense in his depictions of Sparty that his own margins also exist to protect: that the exterior world ('the permanent wound') is beyond redemption,⁵¹ but that if his rural idyll may be sheltered from encroachment by the preservation of its parameters, then

⁴⁷ 'Woe, Woe, Woe', *Demons*, p. 28. This sense of wanting to convey the make-up or texture of the land is also present in 'Allendale's princedom / running with streams / One third in trees / One third heather / stalking / the sheep's track' (*Ranter*, p. 7).

⁴⁸ 'The Last Bud' [1], *The Last Bud*.

⁴⁹ 'Mary Bell Sonnets' [98], Archive: BM 2/9/1.

⁵⁰ 'Radical Landscapes', p. 166.

⁵¹ 'Pearl's Utter Brilliance', *Demons*, p. 13.

it in itself comprises all that is ultimately valuable: ‘here in my closet kingdom on the rim of mad Noel’,⁵² where:

each dock leaf is also a metropolis
 alive teeming with whole communities of ground-down
 life & victors & vanquished & the quick & dead.⁵³

Composing:

The manner in which MacSweeney constructs his Northumbrian province in *Pearl* is tackled in ‘Radical Landscapes’ by Harriet Tarlo, who highlights several significant features pertaining to his establishment of a tangible sense of place within this work. Primarily, she identifies his use of ‘Northern words and [...] sounds’ which emphasize ‘regionality’; the use of ‘kenning’, entailing the compound yoking of two separate words to create new a meaning (often used in *Pearl* to suggest movement as in MacSweeney’s ‘heather-crashing’), and the persistent yet delicate integration of factual detail, where ‘The borage, feldspar, cusloppe, marigold, watermint and heather [...] create a strong sense of the specific environment’.⁵⁴ What is not explored, however, in this sharply focussed and therefore inevitably constrained study, is the extent to which such syntactical constructs, patterns and motifs can be traced throughout the entirety of MacSweeney’s poetry: both in lyrics where the ‘Sparty Lea locale’ is paramount to the thematic effectiveness of the poem, but also in compositions apparently unconcerned with its exposition. By identifying *Pearl* as the archetype of the Sparty locale and the sequence’s recurring central image-system (the ‘borage, the tumblestones, the argent stars’) as its essential structure, it is possible to trace the refractions of these various motifs both retrospectively through the poet’s work, and also to regard them as providing an

⁵² ‘Strap Down in Snowville’, *Demons*, p. 87.

⁵³ ‘Mary Bell Sonnets’ [14], Archive: BM 2/9/1.

⁵⁴ *The Star You Steer By*, pp. 149-180.

anticipatory impetus for his later rural compositions.⁵⁵ So that whilst *Pearl*-esque elements may be discovered in work as relatively obscure as the unpublished 'Toad Church' (1972) in lines such as 'the yellow-hammer / in my iris' bed'; 'Her face her mountain hair stream',⁵⁶ their progeny can similarly be identified in MacSweeney's most mature compositions amidst incongruent images of trench warfare: 'Like the German shells / A wild beck in the sky'.⁵⁷

In the *Pearl* poems 'From The Land Of Tumblestones' and 'Those Sandmartin Tails', such indices exist in references to the crucial, but now redundant industrial heritage of the area ('over sullen ghosts of lead, / the boom of collapsed shafts'), and to the geological composition of the terrain ('feldspar and quartz'), issues which were previously addressed by MacSweeney in *Blackbird* (1975-79) ('miners on the fell', 'polish felspar'), *Fools Gold* (1972) ('Make dawn amalgam / with the fastest / of rare metals, for / you will sign the / very crust away'), and 'The Last Bud' (1969), ('Down into the pit')⁵⁸ and subsequently reiterated in 'Lucifer' (1998), ('East Allen River is brazen with lead rime')⁵⁹ and 'My Former Darling Country Wrong or Wrong' (1998): 'my poetic headland beaming like a leadminer's lamp').⁶⁰ Another important feature of the *Pearl* sequence, MacSweeney's use of regional-specific terminology with reference to landscape characteristics, may also be tracked in this way, having precursors in both 1993's *Memos* ('all over the cairn and the law') and in *Ranter* ('clogged with clarts'), and used afterwards in *Postcards* ('tarn', 'rim of the law'), 'Sweet Advocate' ('muck') 'Daft Patter' ('lonnen head') and *Horses*: 'the untickled brown trout from the burn'. Similarly, his broader (although deliberately sparing) use of North East dialect in a specifically rural context in *Pearl* ('your bairns' bairns') is both mirrored in the preceding

⁵⁵ The succession of repeated images identified by Daniel James as constituting the sequence's central structure ('Barry MacSweeney')

⁵⁶ Archive: BM: 2/1.

⁵⁷ 'Listen It's Plutting', *Horses*, p. 66.

⁵⁸ *Demons*, p. 24, *Demons*, p. 27, *Blackbird*, *Fools Gold* [14], 'The Last Bud' from *The Last Bud*.

⁵⁹ *Postcards*. Also in the same poem: 'coal buckets, becks with brown trout blinded with lead usage' and 'pitiful landscape/blackened with industrial disease'.

⁶⁰ *Postcards*.

poetry ('Learn gristle kidda'), and increasingly evident in his later verse: 'poet upland bonny / lad': 'one hand filled with bottles and the other with scran'.⁶¹

Whilst MacSweeney's persistent returns to the above motifs may be partly explained by their efficacy in evoking an atmosphere of northern regionality, what is more prophetic is that, even in early work, his unique renderings of traditional pastoral motifs – meteorological conditions and items of flora and fauna – were being carefully chosen and manipulated so as to display a highly evocative and distinctive Northumbrian sense. In *Pearl*, for instance, we find references to 'heifer muck', the 'magnificent peewit', 'whip-winged plovers', 'needles of fern and pine', 'soaking the cones', 'cracked peat', 'rosehips', 'moss grows in the cracks', 'cusloppe', 'the curlew broken silence', and of course the virtually ubiquitous 'driving rain', all of which dexterously amalgamated images emphatically conjure for the reader an almost tangible sense of the form, and even the character of the territory amidst which the events and relationships of the sequence unfold.⁶² Yet it is only when MacSweeney's earlier verse is examined with the hindsight afforded by this motivic intensification, that we are able to realise the extent to which *Pearl* constitutes the lyrical culmination of a career-long desire to articulate this almost painfully felt sense of particular place, and to create a dedicated poetic arena for his personal fascination with the landscape and its indigenous horticultural forms.⁶³ In fact, to investigate his oeuvre in this way enables us to discover that the majority of the images now virtually synonymous with *Pearl* have precursory echoes in his earlier verse, and that references to: 'gelded / heifer-blood'; 'SHE peewit'; 'Two hawks and a plover swoop';

⁶¹ 'Shaking Minds With Robespierre' from *Memos*, p. 17, *Ranter*, p. 28, 'Lucifer', *Wolf Tongue*, p. 306, *Wolf Tongue*, p. 322, 'Terrible Changes', p. 23, 'Sweet Jesus: Pearl's Prayer' from *Demons*, p. 12, 'Colonel B' from *Tempers*, p. 208, 'Himself Bright Starre Northern Within' from *Demons*, p. 77, 'Nil By Mouth: The Tongue Poem' from *Demons*, p. 56, respectively.

⁶² 'No Such Thing', *Demons*, p. 15 (a wonderfully 'northern' construct), 'Mony Ryal Ray', p. 16, 'Pearl's Utter Brilliance', p. 13, 'Pearl Suddenly Awake', p. 18, 'Pearl Alone', p. 22, 'Fever', p. 19, 'Pearl And Barry Pick Rosehips For The Good Of The Country', p. 26, 'Pearl's Poem Of Joy and Treasure', p. 31, 'No Such Thing', p. 15, 'No Buses To Damascus', p. 17, 'Sweet Jesus: Pearl's Prayer', p. 12, respectively.

⁶³ S.J. Litherland records the poet's meticulous concern with flora, referring to him as 'leaf presser / flower crusher / plant consultant (free) / herbman' in her poem 'Naming', *The Work of the Wind* (Hexham: Flambard Press, 2006), p. 27.

‘ladders of fern’; ‘cushioning cones’; ‘quilts of rain lashing into peat’; ‘rosehip cluster’; ‘only moss grows in the cracks’; ‘cusloppe stains’; ‘curlew chatter’ and ‘slate-grey rain’ all exist in his work prior to the sequence’s original publication in 1995.⁶⁴

What is apparent from this lexical mapping of MacSweeney’s work is not just the consistency of his motifs, but the extent to which his initially tentative use of signifiers for his ‘Sparty Lea locale’ increased and developed in acuity following his composition of the *Pearl* sequence. The adjective ‘argent’ for example, so generously utilised throughout these lyrics as to be later adopted by critics as a referential hook which no appraisal of MacSweeney’s *Pearl* should be without,⁶⁵ is very little in evidence in his early publications where the expression for silver/white or grey was more often ‘tungsten’, a notably urban and industrial designation: ‘tungsten wings’.⁶⁶ Conversely, ‘argent’ occurs with renewed vigour in later poems (‘the argent moon strides’,⁶⁷ ‘argent moone’,⁶⁸ ‘Argent, blanche’,⁶⁹ ‘argent sky’),⁷⁰ as do other *Pearl*-esque constructs such as: ‘the peewit cries / lifting its green breast’ (‘Sweet Advocate’), ‘ascending up and across the rim of the law’ (‘Lucifer’), ‘mildew crush, leaven my bones in the Pearl whitewater’ (‘I am Lucifer’) and ‘clouds sank into the rim of the law’ (‘The Man who Walks’). Yet whilst it is possible that MacSweeney’s increasing attentiveness towards these particular images derived from an addiction-fuelled retreat into the comforting realms of childhood (or as he referred to it ‘the poetry of unsaddened youth’),⁷¹ his continued insistence on the landscape’s concurrent negatives, its violence, loss and insularity (‘where, under this

⁶⁴ ‘Flame Ode’ from *Odes: 1971-1978* (London: Trigram Press, 1978. Hereafter referred to as *Odes: 1971-1978*), p. 38, ‘Jury Vet Failure/Woman’s Piece’ from *Tempers*, p. 229, ‘Flame Ode’ from *Odes: 1971-1978*, p. 13, ‘Ode Peace Fog’ from *Odes: 1971-1978*, p. 31, ‘As It Were A Path’ from *The Last Bud*, ‘& The Biggest Bridge is Forty Feet Long’ from *The Boy*, p. 31, ‘The Margin’ from *The Boy*, p. 44, *Fools Gold* [7], ‘Shaking Minds With Robespierre’ from *Memos*, p. 17, *Blackbird*, ‘Me the multiplex moron’, from *Memos*, p. 7, respectively.

⁶⁵ ‘with overusing words like argent’ (Ian McMillan, ‘More Hyphens, Please!’), ‘the borage, the tumblestones, the argent stars’ (Daniel James, ‘Barry MacSweeney’).

⁶⁶ ‘For Andrei Voznesensky, for her’, *The Boy*, p. 14. One of the first uses of ‘argent’ occurs in the 1978-79 ‘Colonel B’, where it refers to a ‘shield’ and not to various astral manifestations as in later lyrics.

⁶⁷ ‘Don’t Leave Me’, *Wolf Tongue*, p. 295.

⁶⁸ ‘When The Lights Went Out A Cheer Rose In The Air’, *Wolf Tongue*, p. 302.

⁶⁹ ‘Sweet Advocate’, *Wolf Tongue*, p. 304.

⁷⁰ ‘At The Hoppings’, *Horses*, p. 51.

⁷¹ ‘Lucifer’, *Postcards*.

heaven, is my Mary?',⁷² 'the local / community mistrust, the moral / outrage of the village of Allendale') appears to challenge this reading and paradoxically invite a more encouraging conclusion.⁷³ Perhaps, energised by the positive review reaction to *Pearl* and *Demons* and by his successful articulation of this powerfully felt and liberating topic, MacSweeney had a new found confidence in the poetic validity of his subject matter, the constituent elements of which had been gradually accruing in as yet amorphous states throughout his career.⁷⁴

Personalising:

MacSweeney's intense and enduring psychological engagement with his rural realm clearly contributes to its originality, but it also generates inevitable complexities for the reader trying to unravel the intricacies of his private history. For one of the most difficult, and erratically effective, of the poet's strategies for inscribing his Sparty locale is his tendency to imagine it in terms of personally relevant incidents and relationships whilst implying the existence of a profound synthesis between them. One elementary instance of this is the manner in which the importance of the locality's rivers in his childhood iconography is reflected by their consistent presence in his work, where they manifest as interconnecting physical emblems; a dynastic regional boundary ('crossing your path when I crossed the Tyne');⁷⁵ an evocative symbol of the land's historical function ('the East Allen River is brazen with lead and rime')⁷⁶ and as denotative of his bond with Pearl and her struggle for articulation: 'We swam / against all Tyne tides which rose from the sea'.⁷⁷ Likewise, MacSweeney's fascination with the physical configuration of the landscape, with geological transmutation and the import of the region's

⁷² *Memos*, p. 9.

⁷³ Archive: BM: 2/3.

⁷⁴ Both on its individual release in 1995 and then on its publication alongside *Demons* in 1997, *Pearl* was positively reviewed and is still regarded as one of MacSweeney's best works. That the poet nevertheless continued to proffer the notion of his own poor critical reception is testament to his self-deprecating stubbornness and evident in 'Lucifer' where he writes: 'They slanged my piece' (*Postcards*).

⁷⁵ *Blackbird*. MacSweeney's awareness of his grandfather's displeasure at his 'desertion' is also evident here in the geographical polarisation of: 'long way from Kent/to your rough ash slot'.

⁷⁶ 'Lucifer', *Postcards*.

⁷⁷ 'Cushy Number', *Wolf Tongue*, p. 320.

industrial heritage which was born out of childhood wandering, is evinced in lines such as: ‘a runaway bogie with broken brakes’, ‘whirr of a mill’ and in the desolate image ‘Pick handles / silhouetted in the rain’.⁷⁸ The poet’s ability to assemble the physical environment in accord with such privately significant concerns imbues his landscapes with a distinctive timbre. Yet it also enables him to manipulate, and at points revise, his autobiographical relation (and that of others) to the area: to historicise his childhood and structure personal memories, characters and events in order to best facilitate his figurative vision of Sparty Lea.

The most significant instance of such metaphoric reconstruction is the poet’s depiction of the relationship between Sparty and Pearl, where the emotional correlation which he draws between the landscape and the corporeal object of his first love radically augments the passion with which the locale is portrayed. The instinctive nature of this link can be seen in the way it manifests in his work as early as the 1970s *Odes*, where a capitalized and structurally isolated ‘Pearl’ is used in conjunction with images clearly redolent of his later Sparty compositions: ‘black-backed gull’, ‘stitchwort’, ‘campion’, and ‘rime’.⁷⁹ The centrality of Pearl’s character here is also invigorated by the sequence’s derivation from the Middle English poem ‘Pearl’ or ‘Perle’, an alliterative ‘dream vision’ in which the narrator is transported to an idyllic pastoral setting where he encounters a ‘gentle maid’ who proceeds to query his religious faith.⁸⁰ The significance of this text for MacSweeney can be seen in the way he linguistically alludes to it in earlier verse: ‘SHIMMERTEXING PEARL / WITHOUTEN SPOT OR BODY BRUISE’⁸¹ and in his direct citation of it in the preface to ‘Mony Ryal Ray’: ‘*For urthely herte myght not suffyse*’.⁸² Yet although he deliberately counterpoints his sequence with its literary precursor,

⁷⁸ ‘Tom In The Market Square Outside Boots’, from *Demons*, p. 102, ‘What he has become, in time’, from *Boulevard*, p. 42, and ‘We prompt one another towards death’, from *Joint Effort* (Barnet: Blacksuede Boot Press, 1970) p. 41 respectively.

⁷⁹ ‘Beak Ode’, *Odes 1971-1978*, p. 36.

⁸⁰ J.R.R. Tolkien, ‘Pearl’ [14], *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight, Pearl and Sir Orfeo*, ed. Christopher Tolkien (London: Harper Collins, 2006), p. 15.

⁸¹ ‘JURY VET FAILURE/WOMAN’S PIECE’, *Tempers*, p. 229. A direct allusion is also made in *Ranter*: ‘suiivante she was / privy perle withouten spot’ (p. 36).

⁸² *Demons*, p. 16.

both stylistically,⁸³ and by transfiguring the opulent natural vistas of that poem ('For emerald, sapphire, or jewel bright / Was every pebble in pool there pent')⁸⁴ into the rather more ascetic and yet equally prized panoramas of his own ('heath so swept only ground animals move'), he was also drawn by the pertinence of its themes.⁸⁵ For not only was 'Perle' – at least until the beginning of the twentieth century – widely considered to be an elegy on the death of a female child, a topic which MacSweeney addresses in 'False Lapwing' and in his manuscript work ('Oh my dear Rebecca, my lost daughter'),⁸⁶ but it is also fundamentally concerned with grace and salvation: the crucial symbolic properties of MacSweeney's 'Pearl' and their Sparty Lea.

The total concurrence which MacSweeney envisages between the topography and girl is evident from the multifarious levels on which he inscribes their association. For whether instating Pearl as Sparty Lea's monarch ('I am Pearl, queen of the dale'),⁸⁷ connecting her to a beautiful, fragile image overseeing the landscape ('stalking the pearl moon which tonight is broken opal crescent'),⁸⁸ or representing her characteristics with indigenous natural metaphor ('Leaning into the tall grass grandness of your alert stance'),⁸⁹ the poet continually reiterates this essential correlation between two elements he has called 'the first loves of my life, natural and human and both wild'.⁹⁰ That the syntactical amalgamation of these two elements is at points sexual ('mildew crush leaven my bones in the Pearl whitewater, / make my cock into a rattlesnake of ebony'),⁹¹ often territorial ('A baked canyon there, my Pearl')⁹² and also – in deference to its Middle English ancestor – reverential ('Pearl: beautiful lustre, highly prized

⁸³ Michael Bradshaw has noted how 'The pointed resonances of the great middle English poem *Perle* work well, for the alliterative revival is an apt attachment for [his] gnarled clusters of consonants', '*The Book of Demons*, Barry MacSweeney', <http://www.richmondreview.co.uk/books/macswen.html> [accessed 4 August 2007]

⁸⁴ J.R.R. Tolkien, 'Pearl' [10], p. 97.

⁸⁵ 'What he has become, in time', *Boulevard*, p. 42.

⁸⁶ 'Bonny MacSweeney', Archive: BM: 2/3

⁸⁷ 'Pearl's Utter Brilliance', *Demons*, p. 13.

⁸⁸ 'Himself Bright Northern Starre Within', *Demons*, p. 77. Here MacSweeney omits the capital from Pearl's name so that the reference functions as a colour or sheen, however the status of the character in his work ensures that any such use necessarily evokes her presence.

⁸⁹ 'Daft Patter', *Wolf Tongue*, p. 322.

⁹⁰ '*The Book of Demons*: 1997', *Don't Ask Me What I Mean*, p. 168.

⁹¹ 'I am Lucifer', *Postcards*.

⁹² 'Fever', *Demons*, p. 19.

gem, / precious one, finest example of its kind, / dewdrop, tear of Mary') signifies the degree to which the poet's formative experience of their relationship and the location in which it took place became retrospectively fused in his work.⁹³ His all consuming human passion for Pearl (which impelled him to sweepingly exalt her every aspect and refuse to differentiate between good and bad) became directly analogous with his attitude to the natural terrain, and his love for one's uncivilised purity became – with hindsight and distance – a love for the other's wild and untamed nature. This form of twinning afforded the images their transposable status and allowed them to function as mutually cooperative signifiers within his work.⁹⁴

MacSweeney's representations of Pearl are often couched in broad natural leitmotifs which suggest her almost feral nature ('My muzzle gushes rain')⁹⁵ but she is also associated with sites of agricultural and religious import within the landscape: 'we'll go to Noble's Farm',⁹⁶ 'Pearl stood beside in the sunlight, quiet as the chapel / after service at Catton on the bend',⁹⁷ 'it is Sunday and Nenthead's chapel bell calls us in'.⁹⁸ These details offer a 'civilising' aspect to the pair's relationship, and provide a greater sense of the physical and spiritual community amidst which their liaison takes place. Again, however, this notion of society is deliberately controlled, and the only named characters to populate his Sparty Lea are those individuals who have a positive role to play in the young protagonists' lives: Pearl's 'mam'; Sam the poacher who visits MacSweeney's grandfather; 'Billy' who drives the local bus and 'Noble' the farmer, whose land signifies the children's boundaries and recreational spheres: 'water [...] we sipped without any dread / and ran from beck to beck and back. Each

⁹³ 'Dark Was The Night And Cold Was The Ground', *Demons*, p. 25.

⁹⁴ MacSweeney's love for Pearl is specifically centred on her 'uncivilised' nature and Cathy-esque relation to the wild, unspoilt landscape. His anger is evoked by the civilising encroachment of social judgements and restrictions on both: 'I hate them because I am among their / other refugees. They put up the wire, wire, wire, / along my way'. ('Pearl Against The Barbed Wire', *Demons*, p. 69).

⁹⁵ 'Pearl Alone', *Demons*, p. 22.

⁹⁶ 'Mary Bell Sonnets' [94], Archive: BM 2/9/1.

⁹⁷ 'Mary Bell Sonnets' [86], Archive: BM 2/9/1.

⁹⁸ 'My Mother was a Tree Branch', Archive: BM: 2/10/3 (1998-99).

spring day, a lark / rose in Noble's field'.⁹⁹ For whilst Sparty's own seclusion is emphasised through its poor transport links ('What good to anyone, up the high road, / two busses a day? Mam, what good?')¹⁰⁰ and backwater status in contrast with its nearest mercantile neighbours ('Hexham [...] post / office adjacent to the war memorial, / bus station'), the community itself is further divided by MacSweeney's separation of it into those characters who are sympathetic with Pearl, and the anonymous 'they' who desire her social exclusion: 'Taut, not taught, being kept from school / Was a disgrace, single word 'idiot' chalked / on the yard wall'.¹⁰¹ That Barry and Pearl are depicted as outcasts from an already marginalised society is both a private metaphor for the poet and a crucial aspect of their affiliation with the Sparty locale, whilst the diminishment of their public life as a result of such ostracism facilitates the prioritisation of their natural world: 'April sun tanning the roof – / just myself and the stream's trickle'.¹⁰²

MacSweeney's desire to register the equivalence of the two children's experiences is, however, destabilised by his recollection of a captivating image that embodies their differing relations to the locale, when in both 'Pearl Alone' and the archive poem 'This was the piece of shimmering' the noise and routine of the morning milking are evoked with alternating stark and soothing motifs suggesting the harsh but rewarding asceticism of agricultural subsistence:

Half-awake in the wind tumbled
 darkness, 3, 4, 5 o'clock, listen for the
 clatter of churns, milk warm, creamy
 from the udder, wire-guarded
 bulb hung over the stall, clarts and water
 [...]
 it was cold, mam, but the beasts

⁹⁹ 'Mary Bell Sonnets' [89], Archive: BM: 2/9/1.

¹⁰⁰ 'Those Sandmartin Tails', Archive: BM: 1/18/2 (draft version).

¹⁰¹ 'Pearl's Utter Brilliance', *Demons*, p. 13.

¹⁰² 'Love Song', *Boulevard*, p. 43.

were warm against my shoulder.¹⁰³

This rural vignette – and others like it which occur particularly in MacSweeney’s later work – convey the austerity which is necessary for Sparty to function as an antidote to modern urban immorality, yet the concurrent leanings of such constructs towards nostalgia and domesticity (‘trout tickling’, ‘I made stew from lap of lamb’)¹⁰⁴ undermine Pearl’s frustration with her restricted existence (‘Sick of it sometimes in the hard dark mornings [...] I throw the pails helter-skelter into the stinking drain hole’) and disclose the poet’s ‘incomer’ attraction to, and perception of, the bucolic way of life.¹⁰⁵ As is implicit in the citation above, where Pearl is the active participant and the poet only the drowsy listener, MacSweeney’s status liberated him from economic dependence on the land, enabling him just enough detachment to romanticise his experiences (‘Annie and me slept up there [...] in the firelight’), experiment in contrived pastoral forms (‘fade away on the gentlest of breezes’)¹⁰⁶ and employ idealistic rustic imagery when his metaphoric vision of Sparty required:

Children we wish upon thee a bairnhoodness like the ones we had
at Sparty Lea all heifers marigold beds and slates in the rain
If not actually then figuratively High fells and endless heather
Becks and streams & sikes in which to wash your little toes & hands
Good schooling and an endless wild last wilderness¹⁰⁷

Despite the lyrical expediency of such tactical sentimentality in representing Sparty as a spiritual homeland however, MacSweeney was also mindful not to overplay it in the guise of a rural idyll, and strove to temper this portrayal by charting the landscape in terms of the baser aspects of his pastoral education: ‘under the elm trees when they still stood I would grip

¹⁰³ ‘This was the piece of shimmering’, Archive: BM: 2/3.

¹⁰⁴ ‘Sam Arrives To Take Grandad for the Dawn Tickling’, *Horses*, p. 36.

¹⁰⁵ MacSweeney’s personal recollections of this pastoral life significantly lack the frustration arising from obligation that he attributes to Pearl in ‘Woe, Woe, Woe’, *Demons*, p. 28.

¹⁰⁶ ‘Sam Arrives To Take Grandad for the Dawn Tickling’, *Horses*, p. 36.

¹⁰⁷ ‘False Nursery’, Archive: BM: 2/8.

her hips'; 'pigeon [...] full-blooded it was shot from the heather up here'; 'at the top of the lonnen [...] when I kissed you with young lips pouting like a dawn cock'.¹⁰⁸ Yet as with other instances of memory-mapping in his verse, such description is frequently rendered non-specific ('the elm', 'the heather', 'the lonnen') signalling the poet's defensive tendency to moderate his personal 'revelations' with a deliberate opacity. Such circumspection is further evident in *Blackbird* where 'Martin's Haydon Bridge' binds a character and place to suggest their synonymy for the poet yet he declines to elucidate the significance of the link,¹⁰⁹ and in 'Lucifer' where a fatality is recalled in connection with the site where it occurred: 'Dirt Pot, near where Howard spun to death after a darts match, / just as it said in the Courant', but the person's consequence for MacSweeney is never explained.¹¹⁰ As with his paradoxical use of minor place names and because it hinges on private events, this propensity for anecdotally charting a known territory becomes in MacSweeney's verse a highly ambiguous technique: apparently elucidatory and yet characterised by carefully judged detail that is often resistant to outside comprehension. So that even where his titles seem to offer geographical direction, as in 'A69 revisited' and 'All The Way To Allen Banks', the poet's desire to withhold his locale, impels him to inscribe experiences in a way that insinuates their mysteriousness, whilst barely revealing anything at all: 'a broke-down car / lies at the turn of St. Peter's Bridge. The beasts pass'.¹¹¹

The ultimate example of this manipulation of personal detail and one that is imperative to understanding MacSweeney's psychological relation to Sparty Lea, is the manner in which he inscribes his ancestral connection to the area. The undoubted linchpin of this construction is the poet's grandfather William Calvert, who dominates his pastoral childhood sphere ('the

¹⁰⁸ 'Wolf In The Snowy Treeline', Archive: BM: 2/10/3.

¹⁰⁹ *Blackbird*.

¹¹⁰ 'Lucifer', *Postcards*. This character is also mention in the 'Mary Bell Sonnets' [89]: 'St. Peter's / where poor Howard is buried', Archive: BM 2/9/1.

¹¹¹ 'Mary Bell Sonnets' [95], Archive: BM 2/9/1. Clive Bush notes this tendency in MacSweeney's work and writes of his early poetry: 'Its slow, syntactically-interrupted, gently-moving argument hints at logic whilst denying it, and its apparently conversational style offers confession and then evades revelation'. ('Parts in the Weal', p. 309).

whole world was in his pockets’)¹¹² and in whom he evokes a figure attuned to the landscape (‘follow your eyes to the source of the Allen’; ‘stand by the Allen at Dirt Pot waiting for trout’),¹¹³ and akin to its unique wealth: ‘A rare corncrake / in the wilderness [...] a treasury, always hand-made / just like grandad’.¹¹⁴ That these images radiate nostalgia (‘his grey spike hair often touched with engine oil’) reveals the vital role occupied by his maternal ancestry in the poet’s assessment of his existence, whilst in referring to his relative as ‘keystone [...] to ~~(my)~~ a memory of strength / in adversity’¹¹⁵ he acknowledges the harsh reality of the life that Calvert embodies. Through his grandfather, MacSweeney draws together the thematic strands connecting his lineage with the locale, contemplating ancestry, dignity, the precariousness of rural existence and the tragedy of losing sight of heritage, all bound within a prescient natural metaphor: ‘Our Calvert past is so tremendously noble and on the edge of a cliffe’.¹¹⁶ Yet despite all this apparent veracity, the poet’s relations were no more denizens of the hamlet than he was himself, and his portrayal of them as such is merely a poetic conceit: a recasting of the truth for a particular purpose.¹¹⁷ The ardency of MacSweeney’s historicising assertions here enabled him to transfigure a self-created myth into a broadly accepted reality, but it also proves the intensity of his desire for an ancestral connection to the locale, and the importance for him of congenitally authenticating his role as the ‘Prince of Sparty Lea’.¹¹⁸

¹¹² ‘Sam Arrives to Take Grandad for the Dawn Tickling’, *Horses*, p. 36.

¹¹³ *Blackbird*.

¹¹⁴ ‘Mary Bell Sonnets’ [85], Archive: BM: 2/9/1.

¹¹⁵ Archive: BM: 2/3. The striking through here is the poet’s own. MacSweeney says of his grandparent: ‘I am always referring to you now / when I need to make a strong / moral or political point’, and although this may be the case, Calvert is most obviously a powerful symbol of a Northern rural existence in his work.

¹¹⁶ ‘Sam Arrives to Take Grandad for the Dawn Tickling’, *Horses*, p. 36.

¹¹⁷ In *Poetry Information* MacSweeney revealed that his family traditionally holidayed in Sparty Lea but that their connection to it was not necessarily indigenous. ‘My grandparents had had cottages up there for years. My mother then got a cottage up there; my uncle’s got a cottage up there [...] so we used to go for weekends, and during the summer holidays’ (p. 27). A document in the Archive also shows that William Calvert attended not a rural institution, but South Benwell Council School, and in an uncollected fragment, MacSweeney speaks of him being ‘on the dole in the 20s / and 30s in Newcastle’. (Archive: BM: 2/3).

¹¹⁸ Gordon Burn, ‘The drunk poet’s society’, *Guardian*, 28 June 2006. Burn writes: ‘I was at school with MacSweeney and had always assumed his world was as brick bound as my own [...] Puzzlingly, though, not more than a year after he had left school, MacSweeney was enjoying a reputation as the self-styled “prince of Sparty Lea”, a former lead-mining hamlet a few miles south of Hexham’.

Fantasying:

The sheer isolation and unfamiliarity of the Sparty Lea landscape, even for those residing in its nearest major city¹¹⁹ enabled MacSweeney to infuse it with a (partially) fabricated notion of his own heredity critical to upholding his sense of belonging. Yet it also allowed him the scope to fictionalise it in other ways: as an idealised dreamscape in the manner of ‘Perle’, as a haven and as a portal to other poetic realms. In many respects, MacSweeney is both precise and candid about the self-consciously literary construction of his Sparty locale. The dynamic between Pearl as listener/pupil and the poet as story-teller/teacher is continuously reinforced (my teller / of brilliant stories when the dawn rose’,¹²⁰ ‘read my exercise books filled / with stories by Bar’)¹²¹ and this is compounded by his imagining it as the suitable setting for a bed-time story: ‘I can tuck them in and read made-up tales of the rowan & roe’.¹²² Deliberately rejecting the often upper-middle class and notably ‘southern’ paradigms of English children’s literature, his protagonists’ adventures take place amidst a specifically international storybook realm (‘Call me Ishmael I said / and walked with you in the wilderness’,¹²³ ‘Huck Finn / tale-teller, lets wade through the wild mintbeds’)¹²⁴ which reflect the danger and social realism of such precedents while featuring many of the essential ingredients of children’s fantasy such as anthropomorphism (‘Sipton bees / bossing in the borage groves’),¹²⁵ the elimination of adult influence and the education of the outcast child. MacSweeney’s vision of Sparty as an almost

¹¹⁹ Ibid. Burn also notes: ‘Allendale lies a dozen miles south of Hexham and so, in my mental map, is a place sunk in even deeper darkness. So many places, so close to home [...] their nearness an integral part of their foreignness’.

¹²⁰ ‘Mary Bell Sonnets’ [87], Archive: BM: 2/9/1.

¹²¹ ‘Pearl Says’, *Demons*, p. 14. A dynamic that reinforces MacSweeney’s position as the relied upon authority on whose fidelity in story-telling both us as readers and Pearl as protagonist must depend, and that is also evident in: ‘O stunning quiet reader, seducer / of pathside petals and birdy wings, bringer / of betony, pointer out of fairies’ chimneys’, (‘Pearl Against the Barbed Wire’, *Demons*, p. 70).

¹²² ‘False Nursery’, Archive: BM: 2/8.

¹²³ ‘Mary Bell Sonnets’ [89], Archive: BM: 2/9/1. This is also a reference to Olson’s prose work, *Call Me Ishmael*, in *Collected Prose*, ed. by Donald Allen and Benjamin Friedlander (California: University of California Press, 1997), pp. 1-105.

¹²⁴ ‘Mary Bell Sonnets’ [87], Archive: BM: 2/9/1.

¹²⁵ ‘Mary Bell Sonnets’ [102], Archive: BM: 2/9/1.

otherworldly realm, replete with the ‘wonders / of our mysterious heaven’,¹²⁶ enables him to imbue it with a sense of enchantment, and use the loss of the supernatural as a metaphor for the ravages of maturity in ‘magic gone from the streams and wells’.¹²⁷ Yet for all its promise, Sparty falls short of the conventional requisites for fantasy in its inability to facilitate a happy ending, either for Pearl whose ‘civilizing’ is regarded as a defeat, or for MacSweeney who relinquishes both his love and his redeeming realm, conceding that: ‘The light of recovery is just a lost fairy tale / seeping with ferndamp / in the bluebell vales of your childhood’.¹²⁸

MacSweeney’s tendency to take control of his landscape either by inscribing himself as its princely ruler or asserting his role as its narrator is countered in his work by his sense of the autonomy and self-preserving capabilities of the region. In ‘Black Torch Sunrise’ the poet explores a powerful notion of the topography as an individual entity with little regard for human activities: ‘snow dances / by itself in Northumberland / & doesn’t recognise farmers’ and asserts both the folly of attempting to legislate nature and the importance of respect for the age-old machinations of the landscape in politically resonant images of man’s futile exploits amidst the territory: ‘poets / aim pearl-inlaid shotguns / on Allendale and Nenthead fells’, ‘rural economics are a laugh / if you don’t compensate for snow’.¹²⁹ MacSweeney’s faith in the self-sufficiency of his province was such that he was dismissive of its need for classical legitimisation: ‘At Sparty Lea the trees don’t want Orpheus / to invoke any magic / they dance by themselves’.¹³⁰ Although he increasingly sought a religious or paradisiacal parallel to underline his conviction of its perpetuity, and perhaps to reinforce his belief in its healing capabilities: ‘Northumbria is surely and I mean forever the Promised Land’,¹³¹ ‘the

¹²⁶ ‘We Are Not Stones’, *Wolf Tongue*, p. 325. In ‘SPELL AGAINST FALLING’ MacSweeney states: ‘the clouds move easily enough, without meaning / sufficiently articulate in their own magic’, and although he subsequently asserts that he is ‘no animist’, this insistence on the magical qualities of nature in his poetry appears to suggest otherwise (*Viareggio*).

¹²⁷ ‘Finnbar’s Lament’, *Tempers*, p. 283.

¹²⁸ ‘Free Pet With Every Cage’, *Demons*, p. 40.

¹²⁹ *Wolf Tongue*, p. 76.

¹³⁰ *Brother Wolf* [8].

¹³¹ ‘I Love You But No’, *Horses*, p. 59.

spring / Which comes with God's kiss / right high on the law and it costs nothing / direct from the mountains of eternity.'¹³² That MacSweeney should express his veneration in this way is consistent with his lyrical envisioning of the topography as an instructive, paradigmatic entity from which to learn rather than on which to impose. A sentiment which, in accord with his redemptive belief in the endurance of nature over man's short-lived exploits ('Poppies and men are dead but the flowers *will* live again')¹³³ was also a factor in cohering his career-long responses to the landscape, from 1972's *Brother Wolf*: 'The sea / Taught me to sing / the river to hold my nose',¹³⁴ to 1999's 'Daft Patter': 'there's a grin in the wind [...] as if the frozen air had a distinct personality'.¹³⁵

The consistent presence of the Sparty Lea locale in MacSweeney's work meant that it was often deployed either as a metaphoric device to signal purity amidst corruption,¹³⁶ or used as a catalyst for his wider imagination: a familiar platform from which to access other subject matters and sign systems. This latter use, most often found in the poet's later, more expansive compositions, is embodied in 'The Garden Door is Open On The World' where MacSweeney performs his title's premise by using humdrum Sparty detail ('I get the rabbit's kidney on Sunday') to preface a sweeping imaginary expedition through various international locations:

O Toronto where the blowing snow is beautiful but makes us
 think it's spring with fresh buds O Newcastle in steamy summer
 From the rowan to the holly high up on the Kielder banks it goes
 Paris Monterey Nice Cannes Bordeaux and Saint Mark's Place
 and the brilliant sunny beaches and crescents of tremendous Antigua'.¹³⁷

¹³² 'In Pueblo Colorado', Archive: BM: 2/7.

¹³³ 'Horses or The Fenwick's Third Floor Hair-do', *Horses*, p. 38.

¹³⁴ *Brother Wolf* [2].

¹³⁵ *Wolf Tongue*, p. 322.

¹³⁶ As in: 'Sunlit laurels I am not fit to wear', 'Today we walk by love', *Memos*, p. 14.

¹³⁷ *Horses*, p. 44.

Similarly, in 'Victory Over Darkness & The Sunne' he conjures a setting based on his rural cipher ('Grouse bark in the heatherholes and the whitebeams') before turning outwards to seek sound analogies as dissimilar as sparring Baroque composers ('musick like Corelli and Handel by the East Allen River') and the cries of victims of the 1987 Zeebrugge ferry disaster ('On the Herald of Free Enterprise upon its stricken side').¹³⁸ MacSweeney's 'explorations of the minute', like those attributed by Mengham and Kinsella to his friend J.H. Prynne, are thus simultaneously focussed and predisposed to 'explode into something large and substantial and prone to exponential growth'.¹³⁹ Yet what sets him apart is not just the seemingly boundless array of diverse components on which he draws, or his evident delight in the creation of bewildering juxtapositions ('There she was among the Boots adverts, / The borage, the fastcars and the ferns'), but his enviable ability to combine all such elements in a series of adaptive illustrations through his knowledge of, and passion for, the landscape itself.¹⁴⁰

This lyrical capacity for ranging in time and space, creating dreamscapes whose bounds and fusions were only limited by the scope of his imagination was crucial to MacSweeney's success as a densely allusive writer, enabling him to make seemingly effortless leaps between 'the bronze-leaved sullen golden sleeves of the sike paths' of Sparty and 'the grid systems of New York';¹⁴¹ between the 'dew from cusloppe's rim' and 'yellow rape Jerusalem';¹⁴² to voyage from 'feldspar in darkness [...] to Strangebridge, Cambridge, Trinity Bridge'¹⁴³ and envisage 'William Blake [...] in his black and white [...] by the East Allen River'.¹⁴⁴ In their allusions to O'Hara, Blake (*Songs of Innocence and Experience* constituting an obvious foil for *Pearl* and *Demons*) and the Cambridge poets, each of these constructs also intentionally evokes a notion of the literary community amidst which MacSweeney's depictions of Sparty

¹³⁸ *Horses*, p. 27.

¹³⁹ 'An Introduction to the Poetry of J. H. Prynne', *Jacket Magazine* #7 (1999), <http://jacketmagazine.com/07/prynne-jk-rm.html> [accessed 24 August 2007]

¹⁴⁰ Uncollected fragment, Archive: BM: 2/3.

¹⁴¹ 'John Bunyan to Johnny Rotten', *Demons*, p. 108.

¹⁴² *Memos*, p. 9.

¹⁴³ 'Ode and Elegy: Fidel I'm here!', Archive: BM: 2/10/5.

¹⁴⁴ 'In Pueblo Colorado', Archive: BM: 2/7.

were conceived and in which tradition he hoped they would be assessed. A similar process is at work in lines such as ‘john / clare’s hoe ripping through the blind’ (from *Boulevard* and thus before Clare’s popular revival in the 1980s), ‘I know your heart’s in Helpston today [...] John eating grass. Percy drinking brine’, ‘I am [...] waif in the windrow with a stolen version of Tommy Chatterton and Johnny Clare’, where MacSweeney signals his crucial inspirations by placing his elected precursors in direct relation to the minutiae of his natural domain.¹⁴⁵ MacSweeney’s kinship with Clare was certainly political, a facet evident in *Ranter*’s imagistic links to his precursor’s ‘Badger’: ‘When midnight comes a host of dogs and men / Go out and track the badger to his den’, but it was also a naturalist’s empathy,¹⁴⁶ one furthermore implicit in the way Pearl’s westerly gaze evokes the domain of Wordsworth and Coleridge with whom MacSweeney shared an appreciation of Thomas Bewick. The primary aim of such references, however, is to provide us with recognisable equivalents for his sentiments through which he is able to imply the strength and timbre of his own affinity with the landscape.

By evoking literary parallels for his emotional connection to the terrain, MacSweeney is also able to use his fundamental locale to express his private psychological cataclysms by placing Sparty motifs (usually designations for comfort and home) in threatening conjunction with violent and disturbing imagery. Most regularly, and particularly in *Ranter*, *Demons* and *Horses*, such notions emerge where the poet’s identification with the landscape is strongest, and attacks upon it become, by implication, assaults upon himself, as in ‘harrows and heel-

¹⁴⁵ ‘Six Street Songs’ [II] from *Boulevard*, p. 94, ‘The Shells Her Auburn Hair Did Show’, *Demons*, p. 20, ‘Lucifer’ from *Postcards*. Clare’s significance for the poet can be seen in his substantial presence in MacSweeney’s private library, which contains *The Shepherd’s Calendar* and, even more significantly here, *The Rural Muse*. Here also, the reference to Chatterton authenticates the poet’s use of the archaic and even invented spellings which constitute a powerful linguistic trait in *Pearl* and other work (‘starres’, ‘moone’ etc), a connection which has been discussed at length by Clive Bush in ‘Parts in the Weal’.

¹⁴⁶ *John Clare: A Critical Edition of the Major Works*, ed. by Eric Robinson and David Powell (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1984), p. 246. In *Ranter* the protagonist is a wild animal pursued by the hounds of the gentry, who also evokes another form of literary community by vowing to wreak his revenge in extremely gruesome, folklore fashion: ‘Check your children / in their pink cribs / Watch for the tinker / at the turn of the road / grinding scissors / to trim their hair’ (*Ranter*, p. 28).

ploughs / breaking the back / of land he loved'¹⁴⁷ or 'I am a beast myself and return to see the mint die / All that is left are drought-stricken stems'.¹⁴⁸ This duality can also be seen in other areas of MacSweeney's work: where Ranter's subjugation by the landowning classes reflects the poet's bitterness toward the narrowly restrictive literary establishment: 'Men of distinction / in the chapel yard / Ranter roped up',¹⁴⁹ a matter further implied in 'estate hedges / choke moorland / invaders now / wear suits and smiles'.¹⁵⁰ Both Pearl's reintegration into society ('two daughters you have now / in Haltwhistle and a strong husband who works from dawn / till end of day'),¹⁵¹ Ranter's physical torment and the tourist-driven modifications to his wild Sparty landscape ('trimmed maythorn / by petrol stations' and 'grass-free tarmac out on the Nenthead road') are all crucial indices of the poet's impotent frustration at being beholden to the standardising requirements of a corrupt exterior world.¹⁵² Similarly, the apocalyptic: 'It is the same from Shooters Hill Road to Sparty Lea / the world is falling apart and the fissures are widening' and the desperate 'In this time of shattered valleys and hills' visualize a ravaged landscape to match his mental condition, and the bombardment of 'At the Hoppings' carries powerful emotional connotations: 'Then the starres the argent sky swoon through my filters / And the shells hit our skulls'.¹⁵³

The presence of such arguably hallucinatory visions amongst the poet's Sparty verses may be seen to deliberately recall another of his seminal experiences within the landscape, as Clive Bush rather sensationally reminds us that 'Sparty Lea [was] (a site of MacSweeney's own 1960s personal experiment with group creative, drug and sexual experiences) [...] his Bacchanal which he finishes and moves out from again'.¹⁵⁴ That this event certainly coloured the poet's appraisal of the locale can be seen in the line 'Dear William hello / Welcome to the

¹⁴⁷ *Ranter*, p. 36.

¹⁴⁸ 'Up a Height and Raining', *Demons*, p. 96.

¹⁴⁹ 'Ranter', p. 7.

¹⁵⁰ 'Mizzle Through Slats', Archive: BM: 2/2.

¹⁵¹ 'Bare Feet in Marigolds', *Wolf Tongue*, p. 321.

¹⁵² *Memos*, p. 5; 'Totem Banking', *Wolf Tongue*, p. 315.

¹⁵³ 'At the Hoppings', *Horses*, p. 51.

¹⁵⁴ 'Parts in the Weal', p. 353.

Sparty Lea Poetry Festival’),¹⁵⁵ while his regard for the almost enforced incarceration of these poets within the environment as a hugely productive creative stimulus, is certainly edifying as regards his artistic attitude to the landscape.¹⁵⁶ Yet in view of the sporadic and variable nature of his surrealist forays, this gathering would appear unlikely as their sole motivation. More likely, the thematic expansion of MacSweeney’s Sparty locale was caused by his increasing dedication to its exposition, whilst the more central it became to his poetic, the more he used it as a means to articulate his evolving ambitions and personal traumas. From drafts of the *Pearl* poems where he transfigures the locale into an unearthly scene (‘up here on the rim of the planet, / under the eyes of the stars [...] Moon craters lean in’)¹⁵⁷ to ‘Mary Bell’ where he infuses it with suggestions of insanity (‘free as a peewit’s free: hanging on the wind at Sparty, hence / free as a mad person’s dream’)¹⁵⁸ and in ‘For There is Darkness Which Descends’ where it is evoked using an almost unintelligibly subjective vocabulary (‘quibbles / stutter lonnen’s dawn quietness as bales / & stooks are hoyed’) Sparty became infinitely adaptable to his concerns.¹⁵⁹ It is a process which triumphantly concluded in the shifting, multi-functional landscapes of *Horses*, where Paris, Newcastle and myriad other places and images are fused with Sparty as seamless elements of one creative consciousness:

moons and heifers
oddly-coutured harlequins beneath a high harvest
when you are dreaming of Pearl.¹⁶⁰

¹⁵⁵ ‘In Pueblo Colorado’, Archive: BM: 2/7.

¹⁵⁶ In *Poetry Information*, MacSweeney discusses this event at length, outlining the psychological effects of this restricted environment, particularly on those unused to the situation, stating that ‘there were numerous punch-ups [...] There was physical hostility, which I think was environment as well as the other things [...] It was the fact that people were entrenched in the situation’ (p. 29).

¹⁵⁷ *Pearl*, Archive: BM: 2/3 (draft version).

¹⁵⁸ ‘Mary Bell Sonnets’ [27], Archive: BM: 2/9/1.

¹⁵⁹ Archive: BM: 2/5.

¹⁶⁰ ‘Feast of Fashion Burning Down: Zone’, *Horses*, p. 17.

Inhabiting:

It is perhaps because MacSweeney's conception of his familial heritage and his experience of first love were so deeply rooted in the Sparty landscape that he frequently gravitated towards it in his work when seeking an apt arena to address his sexual relationships, the more affecting of which became the most strongly associated with the rural topography. To some extent this trait may be attributed to the poet's tendency to amalgamate images of the females in his life, thus associating all ensuing relationships with his memories of Pearl whom he clearly evokes in *Boulevard's* 'Love Song':

returning barefoot
from gathering primroses
and mushrooms
you are fording the brook.
frightening trout.¹⁶¹

In 'The Leaves are Trembling', he acknowledges this integrative trend with: 'You said I meld all of the women / into one poem, likewise: for Judy from Manchester, / for Pearl, alone in the marigolds'.¹⁶² Yet there is also a sense in his work in which the qualities, the depth and purity of his passion for the landscape itself constitutes both an aspiration ('my love stakes higher ground') and an instinctive metaphor for the extreme emotions of his relationships: 'She [...] is my Cowshill my Lanehead my upland shaking holes all hopes'.¹⁶³ The natural equations which the poet constructs are not those of conventional love poetry, from 'You're the breeze over mosswhisper in April'¹⁶⁴ to 'Even the wind cannot drive me quite as wild as you, your shoes / jewelled in the rain [...] are wilder than the wildest dogrose / in any Nenthead hush'¹⁶⁵ and 'O / my / Sparty / rain / so / tender / my / Dirt / Pot / pluts / you / ta / sty / as / m / y / lo /

¹⁶¹ p. 43.

¹⁶² 'Mary Bell Sonnets' [7], Archive: BM: 2/9/1.

¹⁶³ 'Six', *Horses*, p. 25.

¹⁶⁴ 'Pearl's Puck Wonder – Ode', Archive: BM: 2/7.

¹⁶⁵ 'Mary Bell Sonnets' [83], Archive: BM: 2/9/1.

ve'.¹⁶⁶ Yet his prevailing theme is the suitability of the territory for framing his sensation ('I love you up here in the / great uplands of the north / From Alston to Garrigill',¹⁶⁷ 'I [...] rise towards Pearl and Gillian and the utmost lights / which send a clear signal through the Sparty Lea sky: to you'):¹⁶⁸ the obviousness of which for MacSweeney himself shows, perhaps better than any other instance, the intense emotional significance for him of the Sparty locale.

The symbolic purity that MacSweeney invested in the dual images of Sparty Lea and Pearl caused many of his desperate struggles to regain his sobriety to centre upon them as signifiers for safety, refuge and the possibility of healing, particularly towards the end of his life and career. In *Ranter* the poet's roving alter-ego is soothed by nature, 'crowned with bracken [...] Robed in the crystal water / of streams to ease your back',¹⁶⁹ and in 'Victory Over Darkness & The Sunne' he wishes for a return to the bucolic as a refuge from urban torment: 'Streets dead / Longing for the sharp winds of my homelands'.¹⁷⁰ To some extent Pearl and Sparty Lea also signify for MacSweeney an image of himself before his addiction and he often describes his sporadically sober self using the lexicons of the rural locale: 'the man with eyes of borage blue, / high up in the heather hills [...] wingbeat driving his brain and snipe drums beating his heart',¹⁷¹ 'It will take two days and then I will be alright. Borage blue again. / Petal poet, soft as the very earthe'.¹⁷² The poet's use of the term 'leaven' in 'I am Lucifer' suggests that he sought in the image of Pearl the ability to transfigure his own character,¹⁷³ and yet his equation of her with lunar motifs ('The Pearlmooon is so tender',¹⁷⁴

¹⁶⁶ 'Listen It's Plutting', *Horses*, p. 65.

¹⁶⁷ 'I'm Waiting Forever', *Horses*, p. 37.

¹⁶⁸ 'Mary Bell Sonnets' [85], Archive: BM: 2/9/1.

¹⁶⁹ 'Ranter's Reel', *Ranter*, p. 36.

¹⁷⁰ *Horses*, p. 29. In 'Daddy Wants to Murder Me' he visualises the landscape as a place in which to escape, both physically and metaphorically, from his father: 'When *ostentation* fled to the hills into my upland notebook', *Demons*, p. 45.

¹⁷¹ 'Sweeno, Sweeno', *Demons*, p. 88.

¹⁷² 'Don't Leave Me', *Wolf Tongue*, p. 297.

¹⁷³ In the sense of 'leaven' as a 'pervasive transforming influence (cf. Matt. 13.33)', *OCED*, 1995, p. 775.

¹⁷⁴ 'War Roses', *Horses*, p. 10.

‘Pearl shines beautifully and there is only one cloud as a shawl’)¹⁷⁵ and portrayal of himself as ‘the wolfish monk who stalks the top of the lawrim’ suggests an awareness that this was a dangerous, rather than a redemptive aspiration.¹⁷⁶ That the landscape may not deliver his longed for salvation is a fear addressed by the poet in ‘Up A Height And Raining’ where he articulates an ultimately thwarted desire to be cleansed by its elemental forces (‘just to vex me inside the bottle the wind stayed still’),¹⁷⁷ and yet quickly and tragically recognizes that a time ‘before the demons held my lapels’ exists only in memory and cannot be regained.¹⁷⁸

This is perhaps the ultimate heartbreak for the poet, for whilst he longs for ‘the broken laced-down light / which moves in such dramatic fashioned grace / all the way from Coalcleugh down the great rivers’,¹⁷⁹ he is also compelled to accept that an actual return to the innocence of childhood will not be achievable within his lifetime: ‘Lord I know ye will find me a place in a lonnen where / I can curl sockless, no matter where the sun is’),¹⁸⁰ and later doubts if it will be reachable at all: ‘I hope God lies easy in his cream heaven [...] because my heaven was stolen from me’.¹⁸¹ Unhappily for MacSweeney, the redemptive potential of his refuge exists only as a literary construct, and from *Pearl* where Sparty Lea is embodied, to *Demons* where it signifies his struggle for sobriety (‘The blood of an invented heaven spills from my shoes’)¹⁸² and *Postcards* where the ideal begins to collapse, the poet appears to undergo a progressive realisation that although the landscape’s beauty and his passion remain,

¹⁷⁵ ‘The Garden Door is Open On The World, *Horses*, p. 44.

¹⁷⁶ ‘Cold Mountain Ode’, Archive: BM: 2/6. In the published version of the poem in *Horses* the line becomes: ‘I am Cold Mountain and Wolf on the Treeline’ (p. 34). That he expands this with: ‘the moon which I singularly compare to Paris’ may reference ‘An American Werewolf in Paris’ which was released in 1997, the same year that these poems were written. In addition, MacSweeney’s use of ‘wolf’ in his rural poems also suggests ‘Wolfcleugh Common’ which lies just south of Allenheads and thus within his Sparty locale.

¹⁷⁷ ‘I stood on the hill with drenched face and soaking nerves [...] I wanted it to blow tonight, to put it right, / to put my G-force twisted face back in place’. *Demons*, p. 94.

¹⁷⁸ A sentiment anticipated in *Memos* with the equally portentous: ‘Trouble on all sides today up and down [...] No rain on lambs wool, no anointment under the elder tree’ (p. 14).

¹⁷⁹ ‘My Former Darling Country Wrong or Wrong’, *Postcards*.

¹⁸⁰ *Memos*, p. 12.

¹⁸¹ ‘Lucifer’, *Postcards*. This statement is preceded with the symbolic image of the demolition of the central representative structure of MacSweeney’s longed for Elysium: ‘the last of our Sparty cottage’, presumably with the intention of allying the destruction of the building with the poet’s own relinquishing of any hope of a return to sobriety before death.

¹⁸² ‘Up a Height and Raining’, *Demons*, p. 96.

he is too far removed to be saved by either. In *Horses*, MacSweeney is tortured by his own relinquishment of the territory: 'Cushy days have gone forever / from marigold beds to a land called Hell' (p. 11); 'I have exchanged my beloved stone walls for sinks and sickness' (p. 12); 'Farewell memories of the past' (p. 28); 'St. John's Chapel is but a lost horizon' (p. 32); 'my childhood lies in tatters beneath the apple trees' (p. 63). These sentiments are echoed in other late work such as 'Ode Lament' ('gone are the clear clean green meadows of yesterday')¹⁸³ and the unpublished 'Mary Bell Sonnets': 'All of my well-established dreams / cannot escape into green Northumberland'.¹⁸⁴ Yet there is also a sense, in his intimations of loss ('It wasn't magic you know') and the way *Horses* returns to the urban imagery of Paris and Newcastle, that Sparty's beauty has been tempered by the desertion of himself as its protector.¹⁸⁵

The emotional centrality for MacSweeney of both Northumberland and Sparty Lea can be seen in his tendency to represent them as a form of personal Elysium, yet their significance is also apparent in the way the poet portrays himself as an almost organic component of their geographies, drawing parallels between the landscape, himself and others in constructs such as: 'Our bodies' veins did not contain blood / but burn water'.¹⁸⁶ One of the most forthright examples of this affiliation was penned by the still teenage MacSweeney, who wrote: 'this is Northumberland. / I think of her as / some image I may be in time', a statement of premature gravitas (as admitted in subsequent lines: 'though my brow is too knitted / for a lad of 19') yet one whose sentiment is entirely borne out by his later poetics.¹⁸⁷ Whether this practice is used comparatively, as when the poet describes himself as 'able to write voluminous sentences as long as the River East Allen'; as simile: 'Like wind / you gust through my life'; as a device to augment his rustic persona: 'I was a redshank lad / in heather and gorse'; or as a clear-cut

¹⁸³ Archive, BM: 2/10/5.

¹⁸⁴ Archive, BM: 2/9/1.

¹⁸⁵ 'Lost Pity', *Horses*, p. 32. In 'The Dollbird/Redblonde', MacSweeney writes: 'We're on the borders night and day shooting at enemies we do not know / it is the end of time and the time of the future / at the same time / Pity us / Pity us / our mistakes are as big as our terrible sinnes', *Horses*, p. 63.

¹⁸⁶ 'The Clouds Above My Prison', Archive: BM: 1/19/2. The poem continues with the complementary analogy: 'The Sparty burn cries for us anyway', suggesting the cyclical nature of the connection.

¹⁸⁷ 'If you lose your leader don't lose your cool', *Boulevard*, p. 19.

identification: 'The sky and I widen, aching'; 'You make me forget turbulence, / the North Sea in me'. this practice of twinning elements of the natural and human recurs throughout MacSweeney's work. It manifests in analogies which denote social insecurities ('I am but a snowdrop in the lonnen [...] I am just a leadmine hush'), physical attributes ('your North Sea eyes') or personal struggles ('my heart is still as heavy as the feldspar carried by Pearl') and the effect is frequently intense.¹⁸⁸ In his 'Mary Bell Sonnets' however, the poet employs this device to starkly disturbing effect by drawing parallels between his own, Pearl's and Mary's emotional anguish through his Sparty lexicon and the use of a shifting, ambiguous voice: 'The passion in me lies deep like a strange lead tunnel' (91), 'You're a collapsed bogie track' (99), 'Pent-up fury rises from the chapel top, 2,200 feet, / and it is inside me' (103).¹⁸⁹

What is clear from these examples and also in lines from *Pearl* such as: 'In my brain a terrible country, violent and wild',¹⁹⁰ is that the landscape provides the lyricist with a natural conduit for articulating frustrated and complex sentiment, and thus inevitably emerges as a potent entity in poems chiefly concerned with personal issues and extremes of emotion. It is this, perhaps, which explains the prevalence of Sparty motifs in 'Mary Bell' despite its urban subject, as MacSweeney dealt with the controversial topic of a convicted child-murderer. It is undoubtedly this which provokes their intensive use in *Ranter*, a sequence that deals with the disintegration of a relationship and of the poet's mental condition. The emphasis in *Ranter* on the extreme interconnectedness of protagonist and environment, one which causes constant pain and is yet essential to the character's existence ('arcing, twisting / punching grasshumps / rolling in rosehip / flaked on flags / teeth buried in clover') is redolent of the poet's struggle

¹⁸⁸ Respectively: 'My Former Darling Country Wrong or Wrong' from *Postcards*, 'Song' from *Boulevard*, p. 55, 'Finnbar's Lament' from *Tempers*, p. 281, 'Snake Paint Sky' from *Odes: 1971-1978*, p. 26, 'For Andrei Voznesensky, For Her' from *The Boy*, pp. 14-15, 'Mary Bell Sonnets' [26], Archive: BM 2/9/1, 'I Love You But No' from *Horses*, p. 59.

¹⁸⁹ Archive: BM: 2/9/1.

¹⁹⁰ 'Blizzard: So Much Bad Fortune', *Demons*, p. 29.

with addiction.¹⁹¹ It is apparent from the adaptive use of designations such as ‘wild’, ‘hurled’, ‘ravaged’ and ‘tempest’ in his work that MacSweeney – and S.J. Litherland who entitled her poems about him *The Work of the Wind* – viewed the violent, inexorable, but transfiguring, Sparty Lea meteorology as the apposite lexicon to convey their experiences of his alcoholism: ‘Fierce bidding for space up here tonight / between me and the gale’.¹⁹² The poet’s passionate use of such metaphors is evidence of the huge emotional significance he placed on natural motifs in his work, an understanding of which is essential if we are to fully appreciate the sincere and deliberate poignancy of lines such as ‘I am as hopeful as the leaves’¹⁹³ and the poetic cinematography of: ‘You are silent & / the landscape fades’.¹⁹⁴

Possessing:

MacSweeney’s conviction in the existence of an organic link between himself and Sparty Lea found at least one extension in his depictions of himself and Pearl as the true monarchs (albeit spiritual rather than autocratic) of their pastoral kingdom, in notions of the poet as ‘hero’¹⁹⁵ and Pearl as the ‘queen of Blanchland’, declaring: ‘Your family feuds are ludicrous’.¹⁹⁶ Yet while such images originate in childhood fantasy, they also denote a serious authorial belief in the legitimate legal possession of ‘our / upland empire’.¹⁹⁷ In ‘Cushy Number’ the poet refers to ‘Our unregenerated soil-heap hillsides’, and in ‘We Are Not Stones’ to ‘our camps of wild primrose’. In ‘John Bunyan To Johnny Rotten’ he states ‘I walk alive alone in Alston and lean against the menu of the Bluebell Inn / because it *is* mine’ and in ‘Himself Bright Starre Northern Within’ stands ‘up here in the heather-glad highlands, my lands’, confirming his dominion over the arena in: ‘I will walk where the plover walks’. In the poem ‘Pearl’s Puck

¹⁹¹ *Ranter*, p. 21.

¹⁹² ‘Blizzard: The Final Pearl Song’; ‘Pearl’s Blizzard’, Archive: BM: 2/3.

¹⁹³ ‘Porpoise in the sky blue’, *Boulevard*, p. 55.

¹⁹⁴ ‘Song: Fever’, *Boulevard*, p. 56.

¹⁹⁵ ‘Mony Ryal Ray’, *Demons*, p. 16.

¹⁹⁶ ‘No Buses To Damascus’, *Demons*, p. 17.

¹⁹⁷ ‘From The Land Of Tumblestones’, *Demons*, p. 24.

Wonder' he commandeers the skies: 'our cloud patterns'; and in 'Good Times Gone Truly Bad' takes control of a microcosmic nation: 'Our streams and becks. Our country. / Our pouring water'. In part, such pronouncements of tenure signal MacSweeney's attempts to rule his own life and addiction, but they are also topographical concerns. For the protagonist in *Ranter*, as for the teenage Barry and Pearl, the issue of land ownership is not one of titled heredity or even native birth (which would discredit the poet's claim) but attainable through the corporeal experience of the landscape itself. Thus Ranter asserts his privilege against the 'Titled Lord' with: '*I won't lope / I won't fly / I won't run away / this is my palace / I know every bolt-hole*'¹⁹⁸ whilst Pearl's entitlement stems from her empathetic relation to the terrain: 'friend of green breasted / plover, keen listener to the wind in the wires [...] I whet my whistle in the same pools- / at one with the world'.¹⁹⁹ MacSweeney's alter-egos,²⁰⁰ then, achieve a symbiosis with the land which subsists beyond the reach of incomers, whom the poet bitterly observes have turned the 'Wild freedom of Sparty Lea [...] into a Nazi camp'.²⁰¹

Yet this final remark reveals the difficulties inherent in MacSweeney's conception of land ownership, for just as Ranter struggles with the infringements into his 'princedom' of the wealthy 'county men',²⁰² so Pearl and Bar are incensed by the 'civilising' encroachments of a centralised authority that they are reluctant even to name: 'They - / you call it government – are killing everything'.²⁰³ Here, the conflicts between Ranter and the 'Men in the know';²⁰⁴ between Pearl and the 'paranoid Marxist Cambridge prefects';²⁰⁵ between native and intruder, become in the wider socio-political sense, the pitting of the individual against the controlling classes, with the implication of a society where rightful liberties stand little chance against the

¹⁹⁸ *Wolf Tongue*, p. 320, *Wolf Tongue*, p. 325, *Demons*, p. 103, *Demons*, pp. 78-79, Archive: BM: 2/7, Archive: BM: 1/19/2, *Ranter*, p.30, respectively.

¹⁹⁹ 'Pearl's Poem Of Joy And Treasure', *Demons*, p. 31.

²⁰⁰ Ranter, Bar and Pearl are all MacSweeney alter egos and he uses each of them (and other personas) to articulate various aspects of his emotional experience.

²⁰¹ 'Bare Feet In Marigolds', *Wolf Tongue*, p. 321.

²⁰² *Ranter*, p. 27.

²⁰³ 'Pearl Suddenly Awake', *Demons*, p. 18.

²⁰⁴ *Ranter*, p. 6.

²⁰⁵ 'Sweet Jesus: Pearl's Prayer', *Demons*, p. 12.

homogenising forces of authority. MacSweeney's potent territorial sensibilities, evident in his hostility towards outsiders ('the Barbour vegetarians, who couldn't / stand the nailed down winters')²⁰⁶ and in his outrage over the political appropriation of land, manifest in his poems in a series of images denoting both the prescriptive and prohibitive demarcation of rural ground which are redolent of Clare's 'Enclosure'. In 'Lash Ode' he alludes to man's collision with nature in 'Leverets. / Fences & phones',²⁰⁷ and in *Brother Wolf* to this precedent in: 'a smart from the enclosure'.²⁰⁸ In 'Pearl Against The Barbed Wire' such motifs are profuse: 'secret paths [...] are pierced by yellow arrow marks', 'wire / is an industry, a containment', whilst 'Fever' affirms a similar disdain for those requiring aids to exploration ('OS number recorded once for future use / but forgotten', 'not / bothered with Kendal Mintcake').²⁰⁹ In *Ranter* MacSweeney clearly attacks the compartmentalisation of the provincial topography ('sheepwire stapling / her fells and fields / wild Northumberland / hemmed in, stitched up') and cautions against greedy appropriation, or perhaps the ignorant neglect of that already owned: 'Drawing maps, borders / wanting more than I had'.²¹⁰ Yet in 'Mary Bell' he does seem to re-establish his claim on the land by refusing to accept establishment charts: 'We had our own maps to make. Light / from lead tunnels gleaming, you and me, hand by hand.'²¹¹

That what was essentially a family holiday destination became for MacSweeney a key poetic resource, a romantically historicised arena and an idealised counterpoint to his native urban Newcastle, may be partly explained by the Sparty landscape's impact on his youthful imagination. But its eminence in his work also derives from the poet's natural intransigence which, despite his pre-existing native connection to a place already at odds with the British

²⁰⁶ 'Cushy Number, *Wolf Tongue*, p. 320.

²⁰⁷ *Odes 1971-1978*, p. 34.

²⁰⁸ *Brother Wolf* [17]. Clive Bush notes that this reference 'suggests not only political appropriation of common land – greatly accelerated in the eighteenth century, but also a more general sense of boundary making, that act of making "mine"'. ('Parts in the Weal', p. 358).

²⁰⁹ 'Fever', *Demons*, p. 19. Also in 'In Pueblo Colorado': The agents of the Pharisees / have now put up the barbed wire / and small posts which keep / us from drinking at the spring' (Archive: BM: 2/7).

²¹⁰ *Ranter*, pp. 25-28.

²¹¹ 'Mary Bell Sonnets' [86], Archive: BM: 2/9/1.

‘centre’, impelled him to inhabit a landscape of even greater obscurity from which to defy his isolation from the cultural mainstream. Rather than undermining the validity of his depictions MacSweeney’s appropriation of the locale and awareness of his non-indigenous connection to it actually enhances their intensity, requiring him to justify his role as bard, pledge himself to the locale and defend it with added vigour from those wishing to infiltrate its sacred confines. Yet there is a defensive strain in his work which implies an uneasy recognition of his incomer status; a vulnerability which is apparent in ‘Mary Bell’ when he asks, presumably in response to a criticism of his ability to verbalize his pastoral scene: ‘What have I missed here? did I not feel the snow / correctly?’²¹² That MacSweeney was unsettled by such a challenge and feared, perhaps, that the authenticity of his landscapes was in question, is evident from his escalating search for effective means to articulate his organic relation to the locale. It is an aspiration which is extant in his self-referential desire to improve on his own work: ‘I want time to write a poem swifter than a snipe drumming’²¹³ and in his allusion to an individual who engraved his poetry on the physical matter amongst which he lived: ‘I am Cold Mountain the wolfish monk who stalks the top of the lawrim’²¹⁴ as a counterpoint for his own writing ‘on a slate in the rain’.²¹⁵ Yet what such endeavours also reveal is an obstinate belief in his own suitability for depicting the territory, a conviction founded on his familiarity with the terrain and ability to transcribe its forms with a natural sympathy he saw as necessarily authentic. It is for this

²¹² ‘Mary Bell Sonnets’ [84], Archive: BM: 2/9/1. Here MacSweeney objects to the criticism because his response to the landscape is personal: he asks how a ‘fat critic’ may judge the accuracy or otherwise of his own sentiment. He also returns to this topic – and presumably to the same provocation – in Sonnet 99 with: ‘The business of the terrific moving skies / is apparent to every poet stalking this time of day – unlike fat / ones who [...] guzzle on the overloaded cultural centres’ (Archive: BM: 2/9/1).

²¹³ *Horses*, p. 13. This line refers to the section entitled ‘Snipe Drumming’ in *Ranter*.

²¹⁴ *Horses*, p. 34. The mythical Zen figure Han-Shan (which translates as Cold Mountain) was a poet, said to have written his work upon the landscape, trees, rocks and mountains amongst which he lived: a concept with obvious appeal for MacSweeney. That Han-Shan was a renowned fugitive connects him with *Ranter*, whilst he also represents another non-English paradigm for MacSweeney’s work. The poem continues: ‘I speak to the wild geese in the garden and know them better than Thee / I lie flat on my stupid back and watch the Arctic terns and know them better’.

²¹⁵ ‘Dark Was The Night And Cold Was The Ground’, *Demons*, p. 25.

reason that he insisted on the existence of a far more enduring, even spiritual, connection between himself and this ‘Much desired landscape loved keenly several lifetimes’.²¹⁶

MacSweeney’s Sparty Lea locale is many things: a symbol of innocence, but also of original sexual awareness; a place of wild escape but one tainted by civilising intrusions; a hope of redemption but one which is ultimately denied; an alternative realm which he entered to explore the themes and preoccupations of his existence and a nostalgic ‘Bolt-hole [...] of memory’ to which he persistently returned during times of emotional duress.²¹⁷ Although he appeared tireless in his pursuit of an ancestral connection to the locale, there is a sense in MacSweeney’s work that this was more to justify to his readers the existence of something he already knew. For him, the bond was instinctive and akin to Ken Smith’s understanding of cultural allegiance as ‘feelings you have about places, people, things [...] that one has to trust [...] as much as one trusts analytical thought’.²¹⁸ Sparty was ultimately the expression of a significant part of himself: one ravaged by time and circumstance, plagued by interference, but essentially authentic and continually resplendent with the promise of a fresh beginning:

This is where we spent the peewit days in silence solemn and
grave.

This is where we woke each day to a heatherglad beginning.

Those windless woodsmoke mornings

[...]

Opening of her lids was like the rising of larks

in the blue slowness of a stubble-burning day.²¹⁹

²¹⁶ ‘Cushy Number’, *Wolf Tongue*, p. 320. That this particular concern comes increasingly to the fore in the later examples of MacSweeney’s work does seem to give credence to this suggestion, as the influx of city-dwellers into the countryside probably increased as a result of urban disillusionment in the last decades of the twentieth century.

²¹⁷ *Ranter*, p. 11.

²¹⁸ Ken Smith, cited by Paul Batchelor, ‘Inside from the Start’, *Poetry Review*, Volume 94, No. 3, autumn 2004, p. 76).

²¹⁹ ‘Finnbar’s Lament’, *Tempers*, p. 284.

Chapter Three: Pride and Prejudices: Notions of ‘North’ and MacSweeney’s ‘Other’ Rural North East Landscapes

Clouds touch the corn
fields of Northumberland. Clouds smash into the
dark torment of a man’s body, as
we squash our own rebellious fires,
kicking the dust of history over them.¹

In Chapter Two, I asserted that it was primarily not a sense of Northumberland as a whole, but rather a specific and personal locale that was central to MacSweeney’s life and work. Having established Sparty Lea’s significance for him as a fundamental and enduring concern, it is now appropriate to recognize that a wider sense of the North East also exists in his poems, and that his visualisation of the region’s diverse landscape reveals much about his literary stimuli, and the ways in which he understood and inscribed his provincial identity. That the physical territory acknowledged by the terms, ‘North’, ‘Northumberland’ and ‘North East’ is frequently a matter of individual interpretation is imperative here, for as Colls and Lancaster affirm in the 1992 preface to *Geordies: Roots of Regionalism*, ‘The “North East” is essentially a state of mind to do with histories and feelings about itself’.² This is a notion also posited in the introduction to the recent regional anthology *North by North-East: “the North” has many meanings; this book contains just a few of them*.³ Although the idea ‘that being a Geordie goes “beyond mere geography” and is “a quality of heart”’⁴ may have been a little liberal for MacSweeney, his North East is not inflexible. In *Poetry Information* he uses such regional

¹ ‘The Pain of Beauty’, *The Boy*, p. 46.

² Northumbria University Press, 2005 (second edition), xiv.

³ ‘Introduction’, in *North by North-East: The Region’s Contemporary Poetry*, ed. by Andy Croft and Cynthia Fuller (Cullercoats: Iron Press, 2006), p. 9. Hereafter referred to as Croft/Fuller.

⁴ Colls/Lancaster, xiii. The authors are quoting the President of the Northumberland and Durham Association from a speech he made in 1957. In the context of this study the term ‘Geordie’ is itself acknowledged as a disputed term, but primarily used in its late nineteenth century context: ‘a pitman who worked in the Great Northern Coalfield’ (ix).

appellations interchangeably ('there is a certain uniqueness about Northumbrian, Northern writers')⁵ and his view as to what the province entailed could be magnanimous or restrictive according to his personal agenda: able to reject Sunderland as 'alien' one minute and embrace a Scottish Borders destination within his vista the next: 'Berwick to Bamburgh [...] Dunbar to the Farnes'.⁶ For the purposes of this discussion, however, I have restricted my analysis to his use of locations broadly recognised as being 'of' the North East. The region's coastline from Middlesbrough and South Shields to Lindisfarne and Berwick; those inland districts of Northumberland encompassing the Cheviots, Coquet Valley and Kielder Water, and the post-industrial environs of Consett and Durham, all of which are recurrent concerns in his verse.

MacSweeney's Wider North Eastern Landscapes:

You notice up in Newcastle, that people who are living in back-to-backs can get out into wild country very quickly [...] this sort of double life you can live –triple life really between sea and river, and the town and the country so near – isn't this something to do with the poetry?⁷

One of the earliest and most consistent North East topographies to manifest in MacSweeney's work was that of the popularly appraised coast: a major component in the region's externally perceived identity ('Whitley Bay's famous golden shore')⁸ and a landscape rich in religious-historical import. Yet if we discount some initial pedestrianism, his approach to this theme is typically distinctive, being founded not upon emblematic castles, seashore fairs and arcades (apropos which his references are rather sinister: 'demons [...] love to do it in a Whitley Bay dodgem car [...] tick them off for our nightly visit with our buckets and spades') but on angling and nautical matters originating from his employment as a compiler of tide-tables and

⁵ *Poetry Information*, p. 33.

⁶ 'When Was Widespread Good a Calamity?', Archive: BM: 1/17/1.

⁷ Eric Mottram, *Poetry Information*, p. 27

⁸ 'Colonel B', *Tempers*, p. 207.

restorer of maritime paintings.⁹ Although perceptibly aware of the enormous role played by the coast in the North East's heavy industry ('37 years coal we have / here, seven miles under / the sea'),¹⁰ it is a fascination with the sea, its bounty and labour force which dominates his work. From *The Boy*'s allusions to the decline of local commercial fishing: 'towns, crofts, / the lighthouse, foyboats, foymen', 'before coalfish / haddock / cod / are cold as diamond / in quayside barrels') to the shipwreck victims and symbolic intimations of coastal pollution in *Horses*: 'Seamen from Valparaiso and Houston will end up dead on the rocks', 'from Blyth where the disease-ridden cod stir in the depths', his concern is with the precarious marine-based reciprocity between man and nature: 'pebbles / and shells and waves those masts and store rooms / those cruel times by / the sea's foundation'. Like much of his North East, MacSweeney's coastline is envisioned through a combination of deliberately melodramatised biographical incident ('The sunne rose over Cullercoats [...] your slingbacks descending broke everything in my teenage mind') and magnificently subjective metaphor: 'I speak the beautiful language of the Northumbrian waves'.¹¹ But it is his captivation with the physical and spiritual presence of the North Sea itself which dominates his coastal imagery: 'Heaven's light [...] upon the rocks / of Seahouses & Craster'.¹²

feel grateful & gentle toward you, you whose house
 this is: like Lindisfarne, I knock, and the grey habit
 keeps the seas and police away: my horse tires
 and needs shoes [*Boulevard*, p. 40].

⁹ 'The slow lifting of unwanted garments: Marxist Song', Archive: BM: 1/19/1. Perhaps significantly, MacSweeney alludes in *The Boy* to both Betjeman ('the sea is pregnant with bladder wrack / your bed was a groaning ship sounding / out the ocean floor', ('Bladder Wrack Blues, p. 27), and Eliot ('Across wasteland, crystals / ice over the heads of dead men' (The Holy Net', p. 42) – two poets captivated by the capability of the ocean. It is likely, however, that particularly in the case of the former, such allusions were intended to signal the young poet's difference from rather than influence by such antecedents.

¹⁰ 'No Mercy', Archive: BM: 1/17/1. Clive Bush also notes how the image of coal is used in *Brother Wolf* to symbolise states of transition between land and sea. ('Parts in the Weal', p. 349).

¹¹ 'Walk' from *The Boy*, pp. 9-10, 'Victory Over Darkness & The Sunne' from *Horses*, p. 29, The Illegal 2CV' from *Horses*, p. 42, 'The Track, Fervour' from *The Boy*, p. 27, 'Letter to Hollywood' (for Anne Menham); Archive: BM: 2/10/1, 'Victory Over Darkness & The Sunne', *Horses*, p. 29 respectively.

¹² 'When Was Widespread Good a Calamity?', Archive: BM: 1/17/1. See also 'Listen vamp your North Sea eyes are sweeping like a broken firmament' ('I Love You But No', *Horses*, p. 59).

Although not an avid chronicler of the historical subtexts inherent in the geography of the Northumbrian shoreline, MacSweeney's concern with Lindisfarne is a vital exception.¹³ For like many writers attracted for one reason or another to this quasi-mythical, quasi-island: the motivation for Tony Harrison's 'Initial Illumination'; Peter Mortimer's *100 Days on Holy Island*; Andrew Waterhouse's 'Good News from a Small Island' and Bunting's desire for a poetic which 'plaits together' in the manner of the Gospels,¹⁴ he made repeated returns to Lindisfarne and its adjacent islets in his work. One evident stimulus for this ritual was his recognition of metaphoric potential in the cyclic and self-protective impulses of the islands' tides, a motif he revisits several times in archive poems written between *Memos* and *Demons*: 'Farnes' surf rumble';¹⁵ 'Farne- / fussing, Farne- / fuming.surf, in / mighty / region / of kippers / and Bede';¹⁶ 'Has yourspace - usurping jealousy subsided, / like the rush backwards of the Farnes' tide tow?';¹⁷ Yet this notion of enigmatic, defensive strength is concurrently destabilized in MacSweeney's work by allusions to the island's historical (and now touristic) vulnerability to despoiling intruders. Ranter is denied salvation and 'hurled off the causeway / asking for Bede [...] Asking for Aidan / I was shown the shore'; the 'eye of the island' is 'in flames'¹⁸ whilst another reference asserts: 'Each / step to Lindisfarne' is 'beyond recall, this the bloody field'.¹⁹ Despite this evident disquiet however, the poet's esteem for the island is clearly momentous. In 'The Clouds Above My Prison' it signifies a broad and distinctively independent entity: 'Northumberland and Lindisfarne wide',²⁰ and in 'I Love You But No' almost the edge of the known world: 'O Northern Starre which I can see all the way to the

¹³ Perhaps because he regarded it as too conventional an interpretation of the landscape, MacSweeney's poetry largely ignores the ancient histories embedded within the Northumbrian coastline, which are matters of huge significance for George Charlton, Katrina Porteous, Ian Duhig, Andrew Waterhouse, Basil Bunting and others poets writing in the region.

¹⁴ 'Keele Recordings', cassette 7A.

¹⁵ 'Derision Right on Time'; Archive: BM: 1/17/1 (circa *Memos*).

¹⁶ Untitled poem beginning 'Tides / clip', Archive: 1/17/1.

¹⁷ 'Dragging a Wing over the Monopoly Board'; Archive: BM: 1/19/1 (circa *Demons*).

¹⁸ *Ranter*, pp. 7-8. The stanza continues: 'Forsaking the dunes / dune misery / stranded on the strand / monks / organising / the next page of Codex / from a cell'.

¹⁹ Extended manuscript version of *Wild Knitting*; Archive: BM 1/15/2/10, circa 1983.

²⁰ Archive: BM: 1/19/2 (circa *Demons*).

causeway at Lindisfarne'.²¹ Yet the island's symbolic role for MacSweeney is perhaps best espoused by its existence as a central character in his 1970s epic 'Geordieus Unbound'. In this project, written in the manner of Shelley's *Prometheus* and similarly based upon the landscape of its composition, it is Lindisfarne's benevolent capacity for healing that is proffered as her (?) true and vital function:

I did all a cd.
 Bathed his ripped ribcage in
 North Sea spindrift I
 Brought in this secret bottle
 [...]
 Will sweet
 love and the need for a cuddle
 be enough to break the chains
 and their power?²²

Whilst Lindisfarne is perhaps the most frequently designated North East rural locus in MacSweeney's work outside of Sparty Lea, other significant sites also recur. The most northerly and thus the farthest removed from his habitual territory is the 815m peak of Cheviot in the National Park. As the county's highest point and thus an obvious poetic symbol, Cheviot occurs twice in *Ranter* in demonstration of the varied meteorological nature of the landscape in which it stands: once to suggest its beauty: 'shimmering in hillhaze / Cheviot to Killhope Law', and once in Coleridge-esque terms to assert its rivalling of the Romantic's acclaimed 'Blencathra': 'Climbing Cheviot / in November / out-howling the gale / that comforts him'.²³ In a later archive poem the hill is referenced in relation to the political

²¹ *Horses*, p. 58.

²² Archive: BM: 2/2. Misc. poems dating from the 1970s.

²³ *Ranter*, p. 5 & *Ranter*, Archive: BM: 1/13/4. This line perhaps intended to redress the balance between the famously poeticised Lake District and its less lyrically addressed counterpart of Northumberland, by evoking Coleridge's poem 'A Thought Suggested by a View of Saddleback in Cumberland': 'On stern Blencathra's perilous height / The winds are tyrannous and strong; / And flashing forth unsteady light / From stern

appropriation of land: ‘Cheviot chine / roped up, / fenced in / Bales of wire / to be unrolled / and stapled / at hedgeless rim’, although the use of ‘chine’ for ‘gulley’ owes less to local dialect (it being a Southern designation) than to the poet’s private passions: both it and ‘Cheviot’ being types of cloth used in fashion.²⁴ In the *Pearl* poem ‘Fever’, the nearby ‘Cushat Law’ is used as an index for the roughness of the Northern hillscape,²⁵ whilst the adjacent ‘Hesleydale [...] Otterburn and Redesdale’ earn inclusion as sites of military import: the locale’s use as an MOD training area making it another vital signifier for the authoritarian requisition of the territory. Such combative connotations are implicit in MacSweeney’s work in ‘Shivering cold awake in ferndawn [...] away from the mess,’²⁶ and in his synthesis of violent motifs to evoke a history of human conflict acted out amidst the landscape. This practice also exists in ‘Mary Bell’ to link his own internal discords with the 1388 English defeat at the Battle of Otterburn, the tabloids’ harrying of a murderer and the current hostile use of the terrain in: ‘so much deadline wickedness and money [...] marched towards me like a flagged-out Hotspur Otterburn army’.²⁷ In ‘The Man Who Walks’, he returns again to military themes and to another image contemporaneously synonymous with this ‘shared’ use of the land in creating a dichotomy between himself as its traverser and the awesome RAF colonization of the skies above the Northumberland moors: an apposite motif for anyone familiar with the locale: ‘Striding across the law like a Vulcan bomber going to Otterburn ranges’.²⁸

Blencathra’s skiey height, / As loud the torrents throng! / Beneath the moon, in gentle weather, / They bind the earth and sky together / But oh! the sky and all its forms, how quiet! / The things that seek the earth, how full of noise and riot!’, Samuel Taylor Coleridge, *The Complete Poems*, (London: Penguin Books, 1997), pp. 316-17.

²⁴ Untitled poem beginning ‘Blood raged high’, Archive: BM: 1/17/1. MacSweeney appropriates this southern dialect word in order to extend the significance of the conjunction and signal his ‘Jury Vet’ verses which explode the lexicons of the fashion industry: ‘CHARTREUSE blanquette, shirt lavender, frayed / mustard thongs. Brown heels’, (‘Jury Vet: In Vogue’, *Tempers*, p. 232).

²⁵ ‘praying for St Elmo’s fire up here on the Cushat Law’, ‘Fever’, *Demons*, p. 19. See Chapter Two, footnote 11 for the multifaceted significance of ‘Cushat’.

²⁶ ‘No Mercy’, Archive: BM: 1/17/1.

²⁷ ‘Mary Bell Sonnets’ [28], Archive: BM: 2/9/1.

²⁸ *Horses*, p. 77. Pickard also uses this image in ‘A History Lesson from My Son on Hadrian’s Wall’: ‘Everything is thinned and silenced suddenly / save for tree-topping tornadoes / flying under radar’, *Tiepin Eros* (Newcastle upon Tyne: Bloodaxe Books, 1994), p. 14.

The apparently clear-cut dialectic between the wild and the commandeered; between age-old machinations and the modern uses of the topography is somewhat undermined in the poet's work by the consistently affirmatory function of another Northumbrian location and seeming antithesis to the wilderness of the Cheviots: the artificial and touristic topography of Kielder Water and Forest: 'licorice lakes / Catcleugh and Kielder / fed with dark burnwater'.²⁹ Yet as his references to Kielder intensify in the latter part of his oeuvre, it becomes clear that whilst Cheviot earns its emblematic status as a local icon and significant natural formation, the reservoir has a far more subjective claim on his consciousness in being intimately tied to specific private events: 'Kielder tree-lined / where you held my hand above the Dodd where we sank / and swam',³⁰ 'I travelled with Prynne through the Kielder Ride and we spoke / Of the abstract beauty of planted larches and firs'.³¹ Antecedently reinforced by Apollinaire's 'La Nuit d'Avril 1915' ('La forêt merveilleuse où je vis donne un bal')³² MacSweeney's own forest becomes an increasingly poignant setting, and from the *Zero Hero* draft (1996) which calls up 'my also / beloved Kielder treeline',³³ to a 1997 version of 'Lost Pity' subtitled 'After Apollinaire and a visit to Kielder',³⁴ he amplifies his intimations of its emotional worth. Yet it is in *Horses* where Kielder achieves its extensive recognition as MacSweeney's cumulative use of detail throughout the sequence gradually explicates for the reader its significance as a place transfigured by the timbre of the poet's profound experiences into a (paradoxically) pure and exquisite natural landscape: 'poet inside Kielder Forest' ('War Roses'); 'Poets stalking Kielder / Through larches and other abstract trees' ('At The Hoppings'); 'eyeliner like the larches at Kielder' ('The Vows'); 'snow bunting not yet left / The Kielder Ride' ('Troubled

²⁹ 'Memories Are Made Of This', *Horses*, p. 40. In that this man-made reservoir and woodland, created in the 1970s and now a thriving leisure attraction seems an unlikely motif for the poet to adopt for positive ends.

³⁰ 'Mary Bell Sonnets' [54], Archive: BM: 2/9/1.

³¹ 'Cold Mountain Ode', *Horses*, p. 34.

³² 'The marvellous forest where I live is giving a ball', Guillaume Apollinaire, *Calligrammes: Poems of Peace and War (1913-1916)*, trans. by Anne Hyde Greet, 2nd paper edn (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2004), pp. 202-203. Hereafter referred to as *Calligrammes*. Stephen Romer writes of 'La Nuit d'Avril 1915' in 'Conflicting Emotions': 'Elsewhere, the wood where he is stationed takes on a kind of fairylike magic [...] which is an extended fantastical conceit', 'Conflicting Emotions', *Guardian*, 19 March, 2005, <http://books.guardian.co.uk/reviews/poetry/0,6121,1441054,00.html> [accessed 12 September 2007]

³³ 'Love Will Tear Us Apart Once Again', (Archive: BM: 1/20/1).

³⁴ Archive: BM: 2/6.

Are These Times’); ‘Through Kielder and the hamlets of Catton’ (‘The Illegal 2CV’); ‘holly high up on the Kielder banks’ (‘The Garden Door is Open On The World’); ‘kissed in our hearts at Kielder Dam’ (‘Wylam Railway Bridge’), and in the last published ‘False Lapwing’: ‘O my lost love what did we do wrong as the buntings / flashed in the Kielder pathways and pecked the earth’.³⁵

MacSweeney’s use of the River Coquet, a less well known feature than Cheviot or Kielder although one with a pre-existing literary precedent in Bunting’s ‘Stones Trip Coquet Burn’, has two important functions in his work. Firstly, the poet’s contextualisation of it in ‘salmon gaffed in Coquet’,³⁶ and ‘prone there / in the Coquet Slot’ is suggestive of the river’s historical functions: the use of fish indicating subsistence and ‘prone’ and ‘slot’ (signifying death and burial) its being witness to centuries of regional violence.³⁷ Chiefly however, the Coquet (along with its counterparts ‘Font’ and ‘Tyne’) manifests in MacSweeney’s work as a poetic symbol for the breadth and diversity of the territory.³⁸ The river follows a forty mile course from Chew Green Roman Camps in the Cheviots, flowing through the valley below medieval border fortifications at Cartington, encircling Warkworth Castle and passing into the sea at Amble, and thus allowing him to address vast swathes of the region in one familiar reference. The notion of scale that this image encompasses indicates MacSweeney’s concern with depicting the region’s totality, and so constitutes a correlative to the literary-cinematic panning techniques he used to describe the landscape in his later work. This mode is evident in *Boulevard’s* ‘Map’ sequence (‘Hexham / twixt sea and sea [...] Corbridge / Corstopitum [...] Ovingham’)³⁹ in *Ranter, Postcards* (‘all the way from Coalcleugh down the great rivers /

³⁵ ‘False Lapwing’, *False Lapwing* (Cambridge: P. Riley, 2002). Hereafter referred to as *False Lapwing*.

³⁶ *Black Torch*, p. 54 draft of, Archive: BM: 1/14/8. ‘gaffed’ meaning to hook or spear a fish, but with the additional North East dialect connotation of a seedy theatre or cinema venue.

³⁷ ‘SWAN NOT WOLF’, Archive: BM: 1/17/1.

³⁸ ‘Coquet, Font & Tyne’ *Black Torch*, p. 60, Archive: BM: 1/14/8.

³⁹ ‘Map, etcetera’, *Boulevard*, p. 24.

towards the working mooring berths of the offshore fields')⁴⁰ and in *Horses* ('my appletree / where winds from Bedlington Blyth Penrith and Dunbar / fly in from every side')⁴¹ and is crucial to the poet's sense of his rural North East in its ability to inscribe the region's expanse whilst implying its powerful subsistence as a metamorphosing historical-geographical entity which has existed through millennia.

Further south from these central Northumbrian locations resides Consett Steelworks in County Durham, a recurring designation in MacSweeney's later work, although one which derived its initial psychological significance for him as an alluring spectacle on the periphery of his own and Pearl's childhood vision:

Do you remember the flames we saw
 from the rim of the law
 [...]
 high
 200 feet from the ovens in the air
 like Blake's vision of Adam in the arms of heaven.⁴²

Yet, in MacSweeney's largely retrospective verse and certainly by 'Pearl In The Silver Morning' (1999), this once prolific factory had become encoded with enormous metaphoric connotations, even acting as a motif for the altered landscape of the North East itself. Here, the coldness of the now abandoned ovens is an index for the loss of industry and passion ('We were hot, but never blasted / were we / like the clearing at night of the Consett Steelworks') and the closure of the works becomes a symbol for the despoliation of the region by

⁴⁰ 'My Former Darling Country Wrong or Wrong', *Postcards*.

⁴¹ 'I Love You But No', *Horses*, p. 60.

⁴² 'Pearl In the Silver Morning', *Wolf Tongue*, p. 323.

Conservative government: ‘the Pharisees shut them down’,⁴³ ‘Just look at Consett / where the enemies of the people were when we stood on the law.’⁴⁴ Similarly, in *Ranter*, the iconographic iron ore which transfigured the landscape by infesting air and earth and gave the town its recognised character, becomes a harshly evocative element of the modern wasteland: ‘Crawcrook to Consett / the red desert’.⁴⁵ As Harriet Tarlo observes, in MacSweeney’s rural poetry ‘the sins are largely those of abandonment [...] industry has been allowed to die and in its place only dumped rubbish, useless paraphernalia remains’.⁴⁶ Yet this detritus is also vital, and his pastoral North East is littered with irrefutable evidence of its past: haunted, but also fundamentally shaped, by the topological and human record of its definitive land-workings: ‘ghosts of miners on the fell / shadowy poachers armed with snares’,⁴⁷ ‘Ghosts / of keels and wherries / in the bend / at Blaydon swamp / no mist-trick / a clanking by the earthworks.’⁴⁸

Aside from this metaphoric use of Consett, other more southerly North East locations to materialise in MacSweeney’s work are those that found their way into his perceptual field through various late-life experiences. For just as Durham transpires as a greater presence in *Demons* and *Horses* as a result of MacSweeney’s relationship with Jackie Litherland: ‘The Flass Vale is a mile from the river’,⁴⁹ ‘And we have swum in the Elvet’,⁵⁰ ‘I can hear your voice from Pity Me’,⁵¹ ‘before Palace Green’,⁵² so County Durham developed as a substantial territory in his later work due to friends and experiences acquired during his attendance at a rehabilitation clinic in the area. From *Ranter*’s ‘Fir Tree to Stanhope’ which signifies little

⁴³ Ibid. Also appearing here are the lines: ‘Passion is fine, fine, a fine gripping thing, / like we gripped fingers / by the Prudhoe bluebell beds, but hot temper is not’.

⁴⁴ ‘Pearl Standing Alone in Sparty Moonlight’, *False Lapwing*.

⁴⁵ *Ranter* p. 22.

⁴⁶ ‘Radical Landscapes’, pp. 164-7.

⁴⁷ *Blackbird*.

⁴⁸ ‘Map, etcetera’, *Boulevard*, p. 24. Clive Bush also notes MacSweeney’s ambiguous inscription of archaic mining references in *Just 22*: ‘The *giraffe* is not only an animal but a kind of upright spinet, as well as a kind of truck used on inclines in mining’ (‘Parts in the Weal’, p. 337).

⁴⁹ ‘The Man who walks’, *Horses*, p. 77.

⁵⁰ ‘Love’s Swanne Song’, *Horses*, p. 41.

⁵¹ ‘In Charge Of The Lads’, *Horses*, p. 30.

⁵² ‘Treasure’, *Horses*, p. 79.

more than a southward extension of his Sparty locale,⁵³ to the later, more detailed references in *Demons* ('Tom out here on the A19 the long September Shadows of England / stretch from Wingate all the way to Station Town')⁵⁴ and its related drafts, MacSweeney's poetic North East expanded in accord with his own broadened personal horizons:

Durham bus station – the worst in the Western world – bus
to Esh Winning
Number 43 which makes my friend and compadre poet Gillian Allnutt look grimmer
every day'.⁵⁵

That his relationship with this 'new' and, for him pallid and dislocated landscape, was not always comfortable can be seen from his frustrated exclamation: 'Birtley: capital of Nowhere Ville. Chester-le-Street',⁵⁶ a sentiment borne from the area's complex emotional significance and alien dissimilarity from his urban Newcastle and the hills of Allendale. Yet the mature manifestation of the 'southern' North East in his work is not without warmth, deriving its sentiment from links with protagonists including MacSweeney's supposed clinic compatriot and nod to *King Lear*'s manic dissembler 'Tom'. In *Demons*, the duo's escapades become the terms by which the poet records his experience of the area, and form a reciprocal metaphor for the place itself:

Tom I do miss your wife Alice
[...]
cloudy pastry tarts filled with apples from your trees
and sweetened by sugar from the Co-op in Langley Park⁵⁷

⁵³ *Ranter*, p. 27.

⁵⁴ 'Tom In The Market Square Outside Boots', *Demons*, p. 101.

⁵⁵ 'Pearl's New Dawn and Silverdew', Archive: BM: 1/19/2.

⁵⁶ 'Good Times Gone Truly Bad', Archive: 1/19/2.

⁵⁷ 'John Bunyan to Johnny Rotten', *Demons*, p. 105.

Tom there's a spoil heap in every village without a colliery

[...]

but you can't escape the molten golden rays of the sky

bleaching the leukaemia lonnens of ICI Bone Marrow City.⁵⁸

MacSweeney's thematic inscription of certain resonant regional sites is a vital feature of his poetic, yet some of the North East designations which manifest rarely, even singularly in his poems, are of equal worth in assessing his conception and literary use of the terrain. In his early work such allusions are often to accessible landmarks ('Tynemouth priory'),⁵⁹ and occur in poems written during absences from home where they exist as touchstones for the preservation of his native identity in displaced circumstance.⁶⁰ This practice recalls Clive Bush's assertion that it was in *Viareggio* (1970) that MacSweeney first used Northern loci as known compass points against which to set explorations of the unfamiliar: 'The local would be a point of departure [...] the young poet explores other cities in other countries for the first time with a sense of displacement and a heady loss of identity'.⁶¹ These singularly or scarcely named places in the poet's early work also signify a willingness to explore the wider province for images to express his Northern identity, as in 'Saffron Walden Blues' where he states: 'I come from the Chillingham Bull': a practice which was largely abandoned following his later dedication to the Sparty locale.⁶² The emergence of such designations at (seemingly) random points in his oeuvre is testament to MacSweeney's capricious autobiographical style and his tendency to synthesise experiences with their locations, a process that enabled him to denote a

⁵⁸ 'Tom In The Market Square Outside Boots', *Demons*, p. 101. The poet is referencing the changing economic base of the North East by alluding to the (now defunct) ICI chemical plant at Wilton near Middlesbrough, and thus in Teeside, not County Durham.

⁵⁹ 'Walk', *The Boy*, p. 9.

⁶⁰ Such as 'On the Gap Left after Leaving' *The Boy*, p. 6.

⁶¹ 'Parts in the Weal', pp. 306-19.

⁶² 'Saffron Walden Blues', *Boulevard*, p. 41. The agricultural and artistic significance of these cattle is the reason for their use here, being a unique and distinctive wild breed specific to the region and famously captured in work by Edwin Landseer and Thomas Bewick. Yet this image remains an interesting one for MacSweeney in that it asserts his Northumbrian identity in terms of the Northern rather than the Sparty Lea area of the region. Also: 'There is blood & I won't be / drained / Gorse, sharp yellow pricks. / Chillingham Bulls. / Hexham Bridge' ('Wild Returns: Gale Hits Jury Vet Probe', Archive: BM: 1/10/1). The 'Chillingham Arms' is also a popular pub in the Heaton district of Newcastle that was likely known by MacSweeney.

privately momentous event by means of a single geographical reference and without further elucidation. This mode is exemplified in his one-off allusions to ‘Dragonville and Belmont’;⁶³ ‘Low Force, High Force’⁶⁴ and ‘O Darlington Susan, what pleasant times / in the Calor Gas centre at Scotch Corner’⁶⁵ where the sites retain a fixed and largely closed significance often suggestive to the reader of little more than that they were known to the poet.

MacSweeney’s specific naming and infusion of his poetic topographies with private biographical materials recalls Eric Mottram’s explication of what the ‘British Poetry Revival’ writers had drawn from Olson, and which he holds to be:

exemplification of exploratory open form combined with a maximum intensity of information from location and feeling, history and geography, interest in creativity and creation myths, myth and reality fused in a distinct location; a poetry poised with personal anecdote but never dominated by it, and always politically aware and clear about the responsibilities of inventive form.⁶⁶

Yet the poet increasingly strayed beyond such parameters, inscribing places which, like the aforementioned Kielder, are entirely transfigured by and developed in relation to biographical incidents, as where the initial significance of ‘Wylam’ to denote Bunting became supplanted by that place’s later synonymy with a more pressing emotional concern: ‘we were still at [...] Wylam / Railway Bridge / Where Malevich gripped our hearts and minds’.⁶⁷ As with much of his locative referencing, the rarely named North East places in MacSweeney’s work follow a general chronological progression from the emblematic to the privately obscure, and in his

⁶³ ‘The Illegal 2CV’, *Horses*, p. 43. This poem is MacSweeney’s version of Apollinaire’s ‘La Petite Auto’, and draws on a specific personal experience which occurred sometime previous to its composition when the ‘tangerine-coloured Deux Chevaux’ was a more popular mode of transport and ‘the old A1’ was still the A1.

⁶⁴ ‘Good Times Gone Truly Bad’, Archive: BM: 1/19/2.

⁶⁵ *Memos*, p. 16.

⁶⁶ Mottram, Eric, ‘The British Poetry Revival, 1960-75’, p. 37

⁶⁷ ‘I’m Waiting Forever’, *Horses*, p. 37. The significance of this event in MacSweeney and Litherland’s relationship can be seen from his repeated returns to this location, and confirmed by the fact that she also mentions it: ‘early pledges, crossing / and recrossing the Tyne at Wylam under the iron / fan spokes the engineer opened to eyes / of passengers’ (‘Surviving Light’, *The Work of the Wind*, p. 40).

mature verse are often seemingly included solely to exploit the opacity of their significance: ‘Hawick or somewhere really darkly mum’;⁶⁸ ‘I’ll go even to the Felling By-pass [...] I’ll go to Birtley / Dead in a wood fire, dead in a Japanese taken-over factory. / I’ll go to Chester-le-Street. A167’.⁶⁹ MacSweeney’s North East is an unfixed and subjective entity; beset by bias and dictated by personal circumstance and bugbears, and his designations are as indicative of the gaps in his familiarity with the rural region (hence the absence of the symbolic Hadrian’s Wall, or the Northern environs of Coldstream and Wooler) as they are of his personal vision. Yet what even such a prefatory survey of his depictions reveals is that there existed in his oeuvre a broader conception of the province than that with which he is often credited, and that it was one repeatedly expressed with immense vitality, and with a particular and personalised regard for the region’s endurance and powerfully autonomous character.

Influences and Themes:

The reverential attitude which MacSweeney exhibits towards Lindisfarne, the North Sea, the Cheviot Hills and the North East territory as a whole: his tendency to cast them as powerful enigmatic entities and declare their subsistence over lesser concerns, is also evident in the majesty with which he imbues the luminescent Northumbrian meteorology and seasons in his work, from the poignancy of ‘the last version of forgetfulness / in the raindrops of dreaming’ in ‘The Last Bud’; to ‘Lucifer’s ‘the beautiful drenching rain, / after lunch in Alston and down from the wilderness’ and ‘driven / by the whip of creation until the raining dawn’ from ‘Cute Petite’.⁷⁰ Yet whilst such extravagantly Romantic images are to be expected from a poet preoccupied with Chatterton and Shelley (and famous for his arguably perverse adoration of precipitation), it is the sheer presence and character of these features which prevents them

⁶⁸ ‘Mary Bell Sonnets’ [52], Archive: BM: 2/9/1. ‘Hawick’ is another Borders designation that the poet embraces into his North East vista.

⁶⁹ ‘Ode and Elegy: Fidel I’m here! (Song of the Cuban Niggers)’, BM: Archive: 2/10/5 (1999).

⁷⁰ ‘Cute Petite’, ‘Bowland Central Forum’, www.bowlandcentral.com/forum/showthread.php?t=35792 [accessed 13 March 2007]. Hereafter referred to as ‘Cute Petite’.

from being ersatz, and aligns them instead with the Quaker-esque notion he expressed in *Brother Wolf* of ‘All things (and the sea) with their own life’⁷¹ In the evocatively titled lyric ‘Himself Bright Starre Northern Within’, the region’s distinctive atmosphere is noted when one character is ‘rinsed with Northern rain’ and the poet is ‘out of the sunne, and into northern starres’, constructions which imply that these elements’ possess qualities unshared by their southern counterparts.⁷² The emotive significance and sheer pervasiveness of such images in his work is evidence of a life lived both physically (at least when possible) and imaginatively (when not) in the world of the open-air, where the poet can be ‘deaf to windborn cries and sobs’ but question ‘the silent rain for answer’,⁷³ in which ‘the trees wave about the silly sheets in the damp air’⁷⁴ and that air is filled with ‘woodsmoke’⁷⁵ and ‘valley / rain’.⁷⁶ The weather’s perpetual movement across the terrain provides him with a natural motif for linking disparate areas of the region and connecting the North East with his other literary landscapes:

The silver birches swept around under Pearl’s moon like a wild wand

[...]

And the eternal sounds of the salmon runs over the edge of the Wear and the weir

The Flass Vale is a mile from the river but is quiet and peaceful

And you wouldn’t catch me in Sunderland at the Stadium of Light

But the brilliance of Rookhope is undeniable and Ireshopeburn

Where the shadows gather like passing strangers and then move on

And the clouds yet still on the way to Dunbar rise like impalements⁷⁷

⁷¹ *Brother Wolf*, [7]

⁷² *Demons*, pp. 78-80.

⁷³ ‘The Last Bud’, *The Last Bud*.

⁷⁴ ‘Porpoise in the Sky Blue’, *The Last Bud*.

⁷⁵ ‘Fog Eye’, *Fog Eye* (London: Ted Cavanagh Books, 1973), pp. 5-6. Hereafter referred to as *Fog Eye*.

⁷⁶ ‘Colonel B’, *Tempers*, p. 209.

⁷⁷ ‘The Man who walks’, *Horses*, pp. 76-7.

MacSweeney's rain imagery constitutes one aspect of a wider theme which recurrently intersects his North East landscapes, the symbolic role of water. The nuclear and linking use of this motif reflects his sympathy with the cyclical courses of the land, denoting both water's necessity for agricultural existence and its significance within his own memories of living inside the territory. In the largely rural poem *Blackbird*, he pursues one of his favoured organic themes in equating the flow of water with knowledge, identity, life and death; from 'deadly violent reefs' to the 'streams of fact' that signify the inter-generational conferment of knowledge.⁷⁸ This correlation between water and the young poet's education is also used in *Brother Wolf*, where MacSweeney declares: 'There is so much land in Northumberland. The sea / Taught me to sing / the river to hold my nose',⁷⁹ and where his nostril-blocking may either be seen as the innocent result of his predilection for swimming 'in the freshwater lakes' created by the erosive flow of the River Allen⁸⁰ or, as Clive Bush suggests, hold the more sinister connotation of their carrying foul-smelling pollution into his idealised landscape.⁸¹ In MacSweeney's North East realm, water as an untameable force of nature is linked with sexual awakening: 'the first girl I saw naked swimming in the East Allen',⁸² youthful diversions ('sound of the stream /over its bed changes / listen. splash! splash!')⁸³ and mental purgation ('I stood on the hill with drenched face and soaking nerves').⁸⁴ Its myriad incarnations – from the 'beautiful drenching rain' to the 'ice-cold well'; the 'top of the tarn' to 'The Elvet' which 'swims with fastwater from up a height and raining',⁸⁵ are founded in a recognition of its life-giving value, but its signification is enhanced by MacSweeney's personal identification with

⁷⁸ *Blackbird*

⁷⁹ *Brother Wolf* [2].

⁸⁰ 'The autobiography of Barry MacSweeney', *The Boy*.

⁸¹ 'Parts in the Weal', p. 347.

⁸² 'The Book of Demons: 1997', *Don't Ask Me What I Mean: Poets in their own Words*, p. 168.

⁸³ 'Love Song', *Boulevard*, p. 43.

⁸⁴ 'Up A Height And Raining', *Demons*, p. 94.

⁸⁵ 'I Love You But No', *Horses*, p. 59.

its terrible and unpredictable beauty: 'If it were raining I would walk / the night, ranging, grieving, riving, rieving, sea-searching maths / of the everyday heart'.⁸⁶

The cultural ramifications and well-preserved physical vestiges of Northumberland's turbulent history ensure its place as another inveterate concern in the work of a poet who was both sensitive to, and keen to align himself with, the identity-shaping battles of his heritage, and in MacSweeney's poems images of local violence and warfare abound: 'the red-coated militia arrived', 'All of these centuries and centurions'.⁸⁷ In *Poetry Information* he talks of Northern language emerging from 'historical, geographical and social conflicts' (p. 33) and of the realm's 'tradition and history – from Bede, the Celtic tradition, the border ballads,' (p. 27) and in *Ranter* of 'jabbering Saxon verbs / the poetry of battle / blood on the words / which are Northern'.⁸⁸ This notion that he cultivates of a hard-won and battle-scarred domain, one vital to his poetic and to the nature of the North East itself, can seem somewhat overwrought in its archaic, formal terms: 'Halfden's longboats / ploughing the shore / Bamburgh at bay'.⁸⁹ Yet MacSweeney's evocation of potent images of the ancient Kingdom of Northumbria was an act in the reinstatement of its legitimate authority in defiance of existing Southern rule, to which end such grandiose phrases as 'Or let me taste my horse across vast Northumberland / like a thunderbolt of blood' were undoubtedly directed.⁹⁰ In *Ranter*, feudal territorial avowals are stylistically justified by the sequence's reliance on Anglo-Saxon stresses and rhythms: 'this is my pryncedom / you're on the wrong ground', '*back on my own ground / blade in your heart*',⁹¹ yet the degree to which MacSweeney affiliates his embattled character with that of

⁸⁶ 'Mary Bell Sonnets' [98], Archive: BM: 2/9/1.

⁸⁷ 'John Bunyan to Johnny Rotten', *Demons*, p. 104.

⁸⁸ *Ranter*, p. 16. This concept of native identity apropos ancient geographical boundaries and figures is clearly related to Bunting's convictions about the historical dominance of Northumbria.

⁸⁹ Also 'Raven banner / Hadrian's leather boot' (*Ranter*, p. 3) and 'Tynemouth yields to the green ocean / Halfden's prow fought against rip-tides' (Untitled poem: 'speak for none', Archive: BM: 1/4/4).

⁹⁰ 'Wolf Tongue' [3], *Odes 1971-1978*, p. 56.

⁹¹ *Ranter*, pp. 30-34.

the North East in other areas ('we rieviers and berserkers',⁹² 'I was a sacked village myself')⁹³ implies not just community and the rejection of state authority, but a far more intricate literary conceit involving the establishment of himself as the conduit for, and personification of, the region's traumatic historical experience. As, in the manner of Apollinaire, he internalises:

centuries of opposing anger

[...]

clashing together

[...]

walk this earth with every battle honoured in my struggling soule

They rise within me

[...]

I see them twisting through

the mountains and fountains of the defeated town squares of my heart.⁹⁴

MacSweeney's awareness of the conflicts inherent in the Northumbrian landscape can be usefully compared here with that of his near contemporary Tony Harrison. That this might seem an improbable link is partly due to MacSweeney's tactical censorship, for in his highly allusive work Harrison remains unnamed, and citations of his poetry are scarce, implied only in MacSweeney's 'it hits a glottal stop'⁹⁵ for Harrison's 'mouth all stuffed with glottals'⁹⁶ and the atypical archive barb: 'Newcastle is not London / it is not Peru either / There are cultures /

⁹² 'Strap Down in Snowville', *Demons*, p. 85. MacSweeney's misspelling of 'reiver' as 'rievers' here could be a proof reading mistake, although this seems unlikely as the same spelling occurs in 'Sweet Jesus: Pearl's Prayer', *Demons*, p. 12. The reference as it is simultaneously evokes the 'Border Reivers' and an American Fighter Jet the Riever F-100, both of which images are conducive to the meaning of the poem.

⁹³ 'John Bunyan to Johnny Rotten', *Demons*, p. 105.

⁹⁴ 'The Illegal 2CV', *Horses*, p. 42. This is MacSweeney's version of Apollinaire's 'La Petite Auto': 'Je m'en allais portant en moi toutes ces armées qui se battaient / Je les sentais monter en moi et s'étaler les contrées où elles serpentaient', *Calligrammes*, p. 104.

⁹⁵ 'I speak astride that sighted star', Archive: BM: 1/18/2 (*Pearl* drafts).

⁹⁶ 'Them & [uz]', *Selected Poems*, 2nd edn (London: Penguin Books, 1987), p. 122. Of MacSweeney's prominent local contemporaries, Bunting, Pickard, Silkin etc., Harrison is conspicuously absent, although this also ensures that neither is he subject to censure.

and kulchurs'.⁹⁷ MacSweeney's desire to underplay this relation may be credibly attributed to regional prejudice and inverted establishment snobbery,⁹⁸ yet certain themes preoccupy them both (as noted by MacSweeney with his twinning of: 'Northumberland and / Yorkshire / are industrial death') and some methodological affinities are also extant.⁹⁹ Harrison's 'History Classes', 'The Earthen Lot' and 'Stately Home' all examine the social hypocrisies inherent in the landscape of the 'British Borderlands' using images directly analogous with those that MacSweeney foregrounds in his work: 'Ministry of Defence, or landed gentry', 'valley mills', 'foundry cast the work', 'peles still seeping with old wars', 'day's hard ride from Cheviot to sea', 'gales know [...] the waves jostle / the skulls and bones'.¹⁰⁰ Yet although these two poets approach the same rural territory, and with comparable intent (Harrison writes 'my children boo the flash of each NO ENTRY',¹⁰¹ MacSweeney: 'They put up the wire, wire, wire').¹⁰² the outsider's poems are burdened by a negativity and convey a hopelessness ('O anywhere but bleak Northumberland')¹⁰³ that the native's do not. For MacSweeney, the very act of the continuing struggle which so disheartens his counterpart is imperative, and where Harrison is resigned to the inevitable persistence of social inequities, MacSweeney asserts the defiance of the region and its populace in the face of whatever besets them ('Fierce I am when I want [...] rive them apart like a marauding riever')¹⁰⁴ and his passion for the land fuels a belief in its ability to prevail, and to heal whatever wounds are inflicted upon it.¹⁰⁵

⁹⁷ Uncollected Fragments: Archive: BM: 2/3. None so blatant a reference (to either Harrison or Pound) occurs in his published work and it is likely that this would have been elided had the poem been intended for publication.

⁹⁸ In Peter Barry's 'zonal' classification of poets, Tony Harrison resides firmly in 'Zone 1': poets established in the popular culture, whose 'names which would probably be recognised by the average reader of the *Observer* or the *Independent*', 'Introduction', in *Contemporary British Poetry and the City*, (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2000); pp. 3-22 (pp. 12-13).

⁹⁹ 'Fire Belly Iron Death', Archive: BM: 2/2: Unpublished material from the 1970s. Both poets use historical and post-industrial topography to capture the fortunes and character of their region, layer geographical detail and manipulate their familial heritage to better inscribe their native connection to place.

¹⁰⁰ Harrison, *Selected Poems*, pp. 175-9.

¹⁰¹ 'History Classes', *Selected Poems*, p. 175.

¹⁰² 'Pearl Against the Barbed Wire', *Demons*, p. 69.

¹⁰³ 'The Earthen Lot', *Selected Poems*, p. 179.

¹⁰⁴ 'Sweet Jesus: Pearl's Prayer', *Demons*, p. 12.

¹⁰⁵ Neil Roberts' assessment of Harrison's work suggests that there are also parallels in these two poets' uses of biography, in that Harrison's constructs are 'heavily weighted towards his childhood', causing his work to form an interlinking *oeuvre* where 'poems derive meaning from each other in an unusually direct way'; enabling him to exploit the possibilities of cross-reference and be thoroughly self-allusive: all of which might easily apply to

The often primitive, hostile nature of MacSweeney's North East rural landscapes, both disfigured and defined by matters of war, industry and subsistence, pertains not just to his concern with the details of local history, or to his use of the region as a symbol for his private affairs, but to an overtly masculine perception which necessarily prioritises base elements such as fertility, fatality and survival over virtually all others. Although not as extreme a posture as offered by Pickard's landscape work where the sex-nature correlation is perpetually explicit ('His first spring / and the sun sucks at his sex / like death'),¹⁰⁶ MacSweeney's Northern scenery is even so propelled by such concerns. In *Brother Wolf* (and later in *Horses* where the image reverberates) his rams are strapped 'together the / hardest headed wins' and nature is ubiquitously blighted: 'Death / on the trefoil', 'Death / on the horns / of a tree. Elm',¹⁰⁷ whilst in *Memos* the rapacious 'hounds flow from rowan heather and gorse' and the murderous 'Charcoal presses its knuckles into the trees / and strangles the light away'.¹⁰⁸ In 'Good Times Gone Truly Bad' the poet creates a post-apocalyptic vista littered with: 'bloated sheep and the dead salmon spawning pools / the collieries you never protected',¹⁰⁹ whilst in *Horses* his ewes are 'aching to be tupp'd'; the magpies are thieves ('sucking hen eggs') to be 'shot [...] with a .303'; a snipe (already militarily redolent and here 'with one wing') is fatally injured and the 'fresh rabbits' are destined for the cooking pot.¹¹⁰ In part, such resonant minutiae in MacSweeney's verse are consistent with his Apollinaire-esque, elemental vision of the setting as a primal, organic construct which prioritises images of decay, transmutation

MacSweeney. 'Poetic Subjects: Tony Harrison and Peter Reading', in *British Poetry from the 1950s to the 1990s: Politics and Art*, ed. by Gary Day & Brian Docherty (Hampshire: MacMillan Press, 1997), pp. 48-62 (pp. 50-53).

¹⁰⁶ 'Rural Sex', *Tiepin Eros*, p. 66.

¹⁰⁷ *Brother Wolf*, [8], [15] & [13].

¹⁰⁸ 'These days will be saturated with filth' *Memos*, p. 20.

¹⁰⁹ Archive: BM: 1/19/2.

¹¹⁰ 'The Garden Door is Open On The World', *Horses*, p. 44. In 'Morphic Cubism: The Strange Case of Gwillam Mad MacSweeney', in *Modern Poetry in Translation*, Series 3, No. 3, 2005, <http://www.poetrymagazines.org.uk/magazine/record.asp?id=17068> [accessed 13 September 2007], Paul Batchelor explores this poem as regards its derivation from Apollinaire and other of MacSweeney's progenitors: Here, "tupp'd" evokes some of Apollinaire's wordplay, as it recalls Iago waking Brabantio with the cry "an old black ram / Is tupp'd your white ewe." The Chattertonesque kenning "rammes" is one of the many references to Chatterton that recur throughout *Horses* (<http://www.poetrymagazines.org.uk/magazine/record.asp?id=17068>).

and renewal.¹¹¹ Yet in conjunction with his predilection for Anglo-Saxon feudal phraseology, the recurrent industrial foci in his work and his tendency to attribute particular significance to sexual encounters set against a rural backdrop, this trend can also be seen as an active component in the determinedly male topological perspective of a poet who describes himself as ‘Man to give everything under snow and rain [...] both of us bestowed and bullioned with love / against a moss covered wall / just for the dawndew love and lust of it’.¹¹²

Such aggressive reinforcement, even exaggeration, of what is already an awesomely masculine history may appear somewhat gratuitous, but can perhaps be regarded – in the work of male poets of MacSweeney’s origin and generation – as a reaction to the emasculation of the North East following the demise of traditional industry. Crucially, the rural ‘monuments’ afforded prominence in his poems, and those of Pickard, are male dominated strongholds now fallen into decay (MacSweeney’s Auden-esque lead-mining imagery, in ‘Killhope Wheel’ and ‘Consett Steelworks’;¹¹³ the other’s ‘Birdoswold Fort’ and ‘Nenthead’) and thus symptomatic of a regional concern with shifting gender roles and the removal of occupational certainties.¹¹⁴ The prevailing ‘maleness’ of each poet’s perspective is a concurrently provincial and personal matter, one exacerbated by their rebellious, chauvinistic natures and developing conception of the rural North East as a specifically functioning foil for their native city of Newcastle.¹¹⁵ As MacSweeney explains, their experiences within each distinctive sphere were ‘of a completely different kind’. For whilst the urban environment and its legislators stultified and persecuted

¹¹¹ Jorge Luis Borges wrote of Apollinaire: ‘He was the “winged and sacred thing” of Platonic dialogue; he was a man of elemental and, therefore, eternal feelings; he was, when the fundamentals of earth and sky shook, the poet of ancient courage and ancient honour’, *The Total Library: Non-Fiction 1922-1986*, ed. by Eliot Weinberger, trans. by Esther Allen, Suzanne Jill Levine, Eliot Weinberger (London: Penguin Books, 2001), p. 313.

¹¹² ‘Good Time Gone Truly Bad’, Archive: BM: 1/19/2.

¹¹³ ‘Pearl In the Silver Morning’, *Wolf Tongue*, p. 323 & ‘Terrible Changes’, *Horses*, p. 23.

¹¹⁴ *Tiepin Eros*, p. 14 & p. 51. Pickard’s early work more than MacSweeney’s chronicles the increasingly limited job opportunities that were available to him as a working-class male at this point in history, and both poets register the extreme unemployment conditions in the North East.

¹¹⁵ In *Poetry Information*, MacSweeney justifies his predilection for Northern dialects as partly a result of his chauvinism: ‘Keats says of Chatterton that he was the first English poet with a really Northern tongue to escape the Gallic feet of Chaucer, and that very much appealed to me. I’m very chauvinistic when it comes to that’. (*Poetry Information*, p. 33).

their creative lives, the entirely accessible bucolic North East represented a means of escape and offered an alternative, almost idyllically primitive setting for their poetry:

the police in Guttersnipe are rapacious [...] agents of a city monopoly, the urban desire – quick and ruthless action, speed and efficiency. To the user, the poet in this case, they are direct threat [...] a cat and mouse game in a crowded and fixed environment [...] The roles played out in a Northumberland village [...] are of a completely different kind [...] it is more than a myth, and Pickard & myself have experienced this first hand, that the actual application of the law in country districts is laxer.¹¹⁶

The artistic inference – in the city’s prohibitive attitude to Dionysian practices – is implicit, and borne out by the exploratory and self-reflexive role which the rural landscape assumes for both ‘as a vital contrast to offset the industrial scene’ and in ‘providing an escape *within* the North’.¹¹⁷ For both MacSweeney and Pickard then, the rugged wilderness of the territory, its encrusted histories and the sovereignty of its wildlife and weather provided an ‘other’ arena in which to examine and reassert both their male and regional identities.

The gruff masculine perspectives, rural topographies and distinctly European timbre of much of MacSweeney’s work seems to place it about as far from the poetry of Frank O’Hara as possibly imaginable, and yet his renditions of the rural North East are stylistically indebted to his American idol.¹¹⁸ O’Hara emerges in MacSweeney’s poems in the latter’s ‘invention of a “vernacular corresponding to the [...] environment”’;¹¹⁹ in his foregrounding of everyday objects (‘bulb hung over the stall’);¹²⁰ in his ‘daring mix of “high” and “low”’ cultural

¹¹⁶ Archive: BM: 2/3 (1993-4, 1999).

¹¹⁷ Alec H. Paul & Paul Simpson-Housley, ‘The Novelist’s Image of the North: Discussion’, *Transactions of the Institute of British Geographers*, New Series, Vol. 5, No.3. (1980), p. 384. The authors discuss the vital role of the ‘untamed elemental force’ of the Pennines as a link between the distinct Northern territories and as an - albeit temporary - means of escape from the urban.

¹¹⁸ MacSweeney refers to O’Hara in an early letter as ‘by far the greatest American poet – truly beautiful’ (‘Letter to Lillian MacSweeney’, Archive: BM: 1/2).

¹¹⁹ Marjorie Perloff citing John Ashbery on O’Hara, *Frank O’Hara: Poet Among Painters* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998), xii-xiii.

¹²⁰ ‘This was the piece of shimmering’, Archive: BM: 2/3.

reference¹²¹ ('to scan the testament');¹²² fondness for in-house humour ('there was a colour about it, not from here, it must have been Sunderland')¹²³ and in his refusal to ignore what Elaine Equi has called the 'dirty' or 'negative' emotions.¹²⁴ Yet most of all this influence manifests in the way MacSweeney peoples his rural landscapes via 'proper naming' ('Tom', 'Jac'), elided self-reference, and O'Hara's mode of using 'names that begin to accumulate attributes [...] as they move through the context of the poems'.¹²⁵ Like the New Yorker, MacSweeney uses obscure names and private affairs to construct 'a figure or rhetoric' of a personal community:¹²⁶ 'a stop-off at Sam's at Dirt Pot for a final gulp of Scotch whisky / And Annie and me slept up there and I made stew from lap of lamb'.¹²⁷ Yet whilst O'Hara's designations were a product of his daily ruminations, MacSweeney's are largely retrospective, making his use, even more than its model, embody the idea of 'naming' as a 'humanist refuge against temporality [...] to stave off the negative impact of time' and recapture his past within the rustic landscape with its 'pony-tailed dances in the Methodist hall'.¹²⁸ It is a vital feature of MacSweeney's poetic that his naming is indifferent to political and cultural hierarchies and his North East is thus as private as it is historical, as he was equally willing to map his region through the achievements of its progeny 'Bunting and Bewick', 'Bede', 'Hadrian and 'Aidan'

¹²¹ Perloff, *Frank O'Hara: Poet Among Painters*, xxv

¹²² 'Sweet Advocate', *Wolf Tongue*, p. 305.

¹²³ 'Lucifer', *Postcards*.

¹²⁴ Elaine Equi, 'The Dirty Poems of Frank O'Hara', <http://www.poetrysociety.org/journal/articles/tributes/ohara.html> [accessed 13 September 2007]. Equi states: 'For the most part, "negative" emotions such as greed, envy, cruelty or pettiness are rarely allowed in poetry except as bad guys to be killed off, then transcended'.

¹²⁵ Lytle Shaw, 'On Coterie: Frank O'Hara', *Jacket Magazine* 10, October 1999, <http://jacketmagazine.com/10/shaw-on-ohara.html> [accessed 13 September 2007]. MacSweeney's references to the New Yorker concede this influence and place him within the imagined territory as a literary co-conspirator: 'This wild O'Hara world / blinks too and shakes / its eyebrows at the sun' ('Sweet Advocate', *Wolf Tongue*, p. 306). Frank O'Hara is also named in MacSweeney's late poems, 'Lucifer': 'and reading everything post William Carlos Williams and Frank O'Hara / and Blind William Milton, just to hammer the message home' (*Postcards*) and in 'Anne Sexton Blues' (*Demons*, p. 83): 'fancy / dans and O'Hara babes'.

¹²⁶ Lytle Shaw, 'On Coterie: Frank O'Hara'.

¹²⁷ 'Sam Arrives To Take Grandad for the Dawn Tickling', *Horses*, p. 36.

¹²⁸ Geoff Ward, *Statutes of Liberty: The New York School of Poets*, 2nd edn (Basingstoke: Palgrave MacMillan, 2001), p. 61, 'Annie', *Horses*, p. 56.

as he was to acknowledge the location of a lustful encounter: ‘we then walked speechless but loins still furnacing beneath the great engineer’s / viaduct / in the North East of England’.¹²⁹

MacSweeney and Northern Identity:

Despite MacSweeney’s inter-regional prejudices, private agendas and ever-mutating notion of the rural North East, he held strong, if somewhat ranging opinions when it came to asserting the nature of both his own and the province’s ‘Northern’ identity. Yet the dispersal of such notions throughout his oeuvre is such that to achieve a sense of what this actually entailed for him is complex, and best begun with an analysis of the contexts in which he uses the terms ‘North’, ‘North East’ and ‘Northern’ in his work. In several poems MacSweeney articulates the indigenous qualities of the region’s populace as shaped by historical experience through the satirical inversion of gastronomic typecasting: ‘we shall / have leeks in / butter. / We shall eat our black pudding [...] we will put our foot down, like / North East people should’.¹³⁰ Whilst the resolute disposition of the region’s inhabitants is also accredited to the (similarly maligned) weather conditions under which the population has eternally travailed, and which MacSweeney as a ‘rain adorer’¹³¹ automatically embraces in lines brimful with integrity, asceticism and blue-collar pride: ‘we / are both just white trash, / under the hardest possible / frank and harsh North East rainlash’.¹³² That the poet was able to self-confidently assert the existence, or at least the ideal, of a broad ‘Northern’ and explicitly ‘North Eastern’ identity irrespective of rural/urban distinctions is partly indicative of his generational experience of increased fluidity between these previously disconnected realms. Yet his belief in the robust characteristics of the common-man Northerner is predominantly sustainable because such

¹²⁹ ‘Good Times Gone Truly Bad’, Archive: BM: 1/19/2.

¹³⁰ ‘Wealth is a filthy rag’, Archive: BM: 1/18/2. Also: ‘Ode to Redhot Beetroot’: ‘All we wanted was pease pudding / and freshly boiled beetroot / fresh from the pan’ (Archive, BM: 1/20/1: *Zero Hero* 1996). The rustic authenticity of such ‘honest’ food is counterpointed in *Memos* by his pillorying of its middle-class equivalents: ‘the chard and sprouting broccoli’ (p. 8).

¹³¹ S.J. Litherland, ‘Naming’, *The Work of the Wind*, p. 27.

¹³² ‘Six O’ Clock’, Archive: BM 1/20/1: *Zero Hero* (1996):

internal divisions are rendered obsolete in the face of a greater common enemy, the anaemic and inauthentic South, as personified in MacSweeney's poem 'No Mercy': 'I address myself to you, bastard hardman, / Southerner, shallow / person, bouncer extraordinaire, / frailest mind of all'.¹³³

In the *Demons* poem 'Hooray Demons Salute The Forever Lost Parliament Of Barry and Jacqueline' MacSweeney proclaims with evident gratification 'I am so glad to live at the / Northern end of the earth! / The south would suffocate / and humiliate me', signalling not only his stubborn regional defiance but his belief in the incompatibility of persons of North and South English origins, and the subsequent disquiet experienced by either if displaced from their natural environment.¹³⁴ MacSweeney's concept of one's relation to place, and thus his understanding of Northern identity, centres on instinctive feelings of belonging and dislocation: feelings which exist at such a fundamental level that they are able to function almost against the will of the individual concerned. In his work such notions manifest in declarations of homesickness ('Landscape of nothings / sick people / grit and grime / of his home / a far-off land')¹³⁵ and in instances where he implies the existence of a magnetic draw towards his indigenous territory: 'going North East, hammered',¹³⁶ 'Awoke / going North East resurrection's / hollow house'.¹³⁷ In *Ranter*, he makes strong suggestions that the failure of his marriage was due – at least in part – to geographical incompatibility. Yet although the displacement here is that enforced by the poet on his lover, the inference remains that the fault is her inability to adjust to his finer landscape:

you fetched me from the city I loved

[...]

¹³³ 'No Mercy', Archive: BM: 1/17/1.

¹³⁴ *Demons*, p. 66.

¹³⁵ *Ranter*, Archive: BM: 1/14/4.

¹³⁶ Untitled poem, beginning: 'I'm expecting the resurrection of thunder', Archive: BM: 1/4/4.

¹³⁷ Untitled poem, beginning: 'Venus pencil ribbons the page', Archive: BM: 1/4/4.

I knew city sparrows and riverside
 pigeons. You shewed me the curlew
 in a far-off place I didn't like much.
 The people or their guttural tongue.
 Their sudden warmth disarmed me.¹³⁸

This conceptual link between temperament and regionality is evinced in the poet's constant equations between individuals and places: 'Shirley from Lemmington',¹³⁹ 'Simon [...] that West Yorkshire lad'.¹⁴⁰ Yet it is most significant in his work when used both to explicate the Northern 'spirit' (a mixture of stubbornness, hell-raising, and integrity), and in its opposite capacity to – knowingly and prejudicially – belittle the flawed Southern disposition, so that he may berate Litherland for seeing: 'So damned Warwickshire clearly'.¹⁴¹

That MacSweeney's sense of North was strongly oppositional is patent, and has been previously traced to several motivations, yet it is the manner in which this dialectic manifests in his work that is of particular interest. On a basic level the designation 'North' is applied by MacSweeney to that which he deems downtrodden but essentially pure ('buckled angel / under Northern storms');¹⁴² stubborn or infused with emotional verve 'Play / gradient hands / across this sexy Northern / cattle grid / Rattle / your hooves on it.'¹⁴³ It is used subjectively to denote the stronger, more positive aspects of his temperament, particularly when lyrically accredited to non-native others (a nod to his own proclivity for regional stereotyping), and when his identity is under threat from external forces: 'prince of the northern air, with his

¹³⁸ *Ranter*, p. 23. At the end of 'Finnbar's Lament' MacSweeney implies the vast geographical and emotional distance between himself and his love: 'Her plaid flapping in the southern wind at the world's rim' (*Tempers*, p. 285).

¹³⁹ 'Land of Broken Hearts', Archive: BM: 1/19/1.

¹⁴⁰ 'No Attention Please', Archive: BM: 2/3

¹⁴¹ 'Dead Man's Handle', *Demons*, p. 75. MacSweeney's tendency to identify Litherland with her native county – despite her having quit it several decades previously – is a typical example. His penchant for using such designations as insults is recorded in Litherland's poem 'St Valentine's Day': 'the jibe loosened upon the air, / *I'm not from Warwickshire*', an attack which she diffuses at the poem's finale by appropriating the term for herself, with: '*Warwickshire says No*', *The Work of the Wind*, p. 44.

¹⁴² *Ranter*, p. 36.

¹⁴³ 'Torpedo', *Odes 1971-1978*, p. 39.

tough tender love'.¹⁴⁴ In *Memos* this private usage is employed as a metaphor for the poet's psychological inaccessibility and his lover's inability to provide him further support ('I have been to the top of the cairn for you, northern prince, / and I died every inch of the way'),¹⁴⁵ whilst in *Ranter* it denotes both his mental and physical nature 'Featherpeltstricken / moaning cloakclasp poems / even when I lay gladly / in your Northern arms'.¹⁴⁶ A brief archive poem affirms the poet's opinion of the South as a transient, artificial landscape: 'clouds / zipping / past / southern stars / city lights / beaming into / Northern night',¹⁴⁷ whilst anti-Southern sentiment also abounds in his allusions to the intent of the institutions of power to corrupt the authentic Northern realm with its greedy and stereotypically 'soft' ideals. A dialectic evident in 'Fat city, lush / tandem for these Northern dreams / conveying all there is to know / of bread',¹⁴⁸ in the resistance and suspicion implicit in 'Northern / feet / vexynge our coast' and 'journey North. / hard-featured men [...] music pealed along / cowarde Londonne burn',¹⁴⁹ in the purposely Bunting-esque: 'southrons / pagan song drives iron / into your plaid money',¹⁵⁰ in the dactylic metre of: 'parasite, parasite / where have you been / i've been sucking the blood / of the Northern dream',¹⁵¹ and in the sharply laden manufacturing metaphor:

heart

base metals and politically

iron constitution, prevent

softness from poisoning our system

(to come south to marshmallow language

is to soften the weave of the cloth) –

gan is not go.¹⁵²

¹⁴⁴ 'Sweeno, Sweeno', *Demons*, p. 88.

¹⁴⁵ 'Trouble on all sides today up and down', *Memos*, p. 14.

¹⁴⁶ *Ranter*, p. 40.

¹⁴⁷ 'Feb 28/29: 10pm', Archive: BM: 1/17/1.

¹⁴⁸ 'Ode Stem Hair', *Odes 1971-1978*, p. 29.

¹⁴⁹ 'Wolf Tongue' [I], *Odes 1971-1978*, p. 52.

¹⁵⁰ *Black Torch*, p. 13. Archive: BM: 1/14/8.

¹⁵¹ 'Human Flea', Archive: BM: 1/4/4.

¹⁵² Archive: BM: 2/3 (Various material, mixed dates: 1993-4, 1999).

MacSweeney's scorn for 'marshmallow language' evokes another considerable theme in his work where issues of 'North' and authenticity resound: the significance and origins of native dialect. The poet attributes his formative comprehension of the relationship between linguistics and Northern identity to Keats' appraisal of Chatterton as 'the first English poet with a really Northern tongue to escape the Gallic feet of Chaucer'.¹⁵³ This cerebral association accounts for the perpetual twinning of the Bristolian with the designation 'North' in his work: from 'scarlet boulevard which for Chatterton / was a Northern route to hell'¹⁵⁴ to 'Ode: Resolution's 'French words dominated / Chaucer's day. / They ate away the oak & rose [...] Chatterton knew / his way to a / Northern / Cup',¹⁵⁵ and 'Wolf Tongue's use of Chatterton-esque forms to evoke his linguistic edifices: 'I ate brondeous Hotspur's rural *rrr* / my lips inside an acorne-coppe [...] sheath this quill in absolute commitment / to a language going North / without maps'.¹⁵⁶ Yet what emerges here in MacSweeney's use of 'knew', 'commitment' and 'without maps', and what he holds in common with North East incomer Bill Griffiths who has stated that his interest in the local dialect originated in its similarity with Old English: 'it's a spoken language, but it goes back' – is a concern with the historical resonance of a language innately preserved by the very dynamic which underpins the region's marginalisation: its remoteness from London.¹⁵⁷ The monumental nature of this consideration for MacSweeney and for other North Easterners intent on articulating their identity is hard to overplay, and the poet's own explication of this matter became a powerful theme in his work, being latterly apparent in his fidelity to the archaic spellings of 'snowe', 'sunne' and 'starre' (amongst others), in Ranter's hatred of 'French words / invading my books' and his affinity

¹⁵³ *Poetry Information*, p. 33. Keats' statement runs: "The purest English I think – or what ought to be the purest – is Chatterton's. The language had existed long enough to be entirely uncorrupted of Chaucer's Gallicisms and still the old words are used – Chatterton's language is entirely Northern – I prefer the native music of it to Milton's cut by feet. I have but lately stood on my guard against Milton" (Keats, Autumn 1819, cited by Linda Kelly, *The Marvellous Boy: The Life and Myth of Thomas Chatterton* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicholson, 1971), p. 101).

¹⁵⁴ *Brother Wolf* [12].

¹⁵⁵ Odes 1971-78, p. 37.

¹⁵⁶ 'Wolf Tongue' [II], *Odes 1971-1978*, p. 54.

¹⁵⁷ 'When I started to list the dialect words being used around me, it struck me that there was a lot of Old English words. 'Bairn' for example, is exactly the same. Or 'nowt' for nothing', Paul Batchelor, 'An Outsider Still: An Interview with Bill Griffiths', www.acknowledgedland.com/ [accessed 13 September 2007]

with the Northumbrian ‘*Eachwine / Prince of scribes*’.¹⁵⁸ It is at its most overt in unpublished archive fragments where MacSweeney alludes to both the pedigree of Scots and Irish which informs North East dialect: ‘Only Gaelic borrows no centralised language’ and asserts the proud, exemplary strength of the lingo itself:

Northumbrian will not be [*reverted?*]
 easily (or at all)
 on important decisions
 made over key issues – malleability is a rare thread
 In wor political nature’.¹⁵⁹

The sheer vigour of such sentiment; the intimations of defiance and community and the radical assertion that the North East even has such a ‘nature’ is evidence that, like many modern poets of marginalised landscapes, MacSweeney’s concept of North was political, for as Bush writes of his work: “‘Place’ [...] is always associated, no less than in Fisher, with the historical locations of its power’.¹⁶⁰ In some respects his understanding and reclamation of his territory was achieved with similar tools to those mobilised by his Scottish and Welsh contemporaries in their analogous struggles of the 1970s to wrench themselves from the central apparatus, in that he had formatively looked towards American, French and Russian poetics to equip him with ‘an alternative centre of gravity’ and release him from hegemonic English forms.¹⁶¹ In order to assert Northern strength and autonomy he lyrically elevates the violent and subversive aspects of his region’s history, including the treasonous ‘Hotspur’ and

¹⁵⁸ *Ranter*, p. 20.

¹⁵⁹ Archive: BM: 2/3. BM: 2/3 (Various material, mixed dates: 1993-4, 1999).

¹⁶⁰ Bush is speaking of MacSweeney’s references to Greenwich in *Just 22 and I Don’t Mind Dying*, but the comment also applies to the poet’s allusions to Northumbria’s historical superiority. (‘Parts in the Weal’, p. 337).

¹⁶¹ Cairns Craig; ‘From the Lost Ground: Liz Lochhead, Douglas Dunn and Contemporary Scottish Poetry’, in *Contemporary British Poetry: Essays in Theory and Criticism*, ed. by James Acheson & Romana Huk (New York: State University of New York Press, 1996), pp. 343-372 (p. 350). In MacSweeney’s case this was perhaps less a question of influence or shared tactics than a result of his tendency to embrace activism and radicalism in all its forms, and align himself with a series of social revolutionaries who questioned the status quo, from Rimbaud and Mayakovsky to Dylan and Cash.

‘marauding riever’,¹⁶² and in a mode later defined by Edward Soja, explores how ‘relations of power and discipline are inscribed into the apparently innocent spatiality of social life, how human geographies become filled with politics and ideology’.¹⁶³ Like Robert Minhinnick, whose concern in *Native Ground* is with the socio-topographical evidence of English land appropriation in his childhood region of Wales (‘Llangewydd’s / Square mile of history, its cwms and / Slow decaying farms’)¹⁶⁴ MacSweeney creates a political landscape on the basis of the class divisions which continue to beset the rural North East:

mill wheel
 bairns weavers ripmachines
 from awnings Calder cracks broke
 mill-wheels back “murdered because he
 was poor” Tyke tip blacklands gashed
 slag and rusted flywheel blur’¹⁶⁵

The poet’s opposition to a Southern academic poetry *politic* (‘you Faber kids always making cocoa / for the University of Boredom and strange deregulated muse’), his challenging verse forms and resolve to ally himself with radical precedents, were all elements of this stance. It was these devices that enabled him to sustain the schism which lies at the heart of his poetic and construct an enemy for his antagonistic sense of ‘North’ to rail against.¹⁶⁶

¹⁶² ‘Sweet Jesus: Pearl’s Prayer’, *Demons*, p. 12.

¹⁶³ Edward Soja, *Postmodern Geographies: The Reassertion of Space in Critical Social Theory* (London and New York: Verso, 1989) p. 6.

¹⁶⁴ ‘J.P.’, *Native Ground*, (Swansea: Christopher Davies Publishing Ltd, 1979), p. 43.

¹⁶⁵ ‘Fire Belly Iron Death’, Archive: BM: 2/2. Poem circa September 1976.

¹⁶⁶ ‘Cute Petite’. A line resplendent with typical anti-establishment bile, this time directed at Sean O’Brien.

Wandering & Mapping: Northumbria's Still Unfixed Identity?

The affirmative iconographic use of North, North East and Northumberland is clearly evident throughout MacSweeney's verse, yet his fixation with mapping, separation, travel and distance is indicative of a simultaneous struggle with concepts of heredity, belonging and the search for a true sense of self. MacSweeney's use of maps, even in early work is denotative of self-questioning anxieties, doubt, transience and dislocation: 'anonymous rivers counties / lost maps. scrolls crumble, red letters'.¹⁶⁷ In virtually every case, his directional references convey a metaphorical duality, although formative examples can be rather unsubtle: 'Which street will I / be walking in next time you hear me?',¹⁶⁸ 'a path / forking and no signs',¹⁶⁹ 'a pointer is set in no path or direction'.¹⁷⁰ The 'Map' sequence itself constitutes the poet's earliest attempt at constructing a sense of regional totality ('river disappears / through mineshaft / under fell')¹⁷¹ but its formality and objectivity makes it rather an aberration amidst his North East illustrations, and almost the antithesis of Ranter's frantic topographical questing conceived over a decade later, which far better exemplifies the poet's overall use of the motif: 'running and running / remote and reduced'.¹⁷² In *Ranter's* epilogue 'Finnbar's Lament' (1986) MacSweeney's protagonist is still 'searching for justice / in unexpected places'; in *Memos* (1993) the poet is 'Sunk at my crossroads, hellhounds baying' and in *Horses* (2004) MacSweeney laments 'the voyages in my head are just too far'. The unattainability that such phrases exude is further compounded by the persistent equation of physical and emotional distance, and MacSweeney's work is littered with the language of painful separation: 'You're three hundred miles away now and I miss you', 'that foreign place', 'both alone / by rivers we love', 'wandering wife far from / home', 'long way from

¹⁶⁷ 'For A Pale Time, No Matter', *The Boy*, p. 18.

¹⁶⁸ 'The Last Bud' [4], *The Last Bud*.

¹⁶⁹ 'As It Were a Path', *The Last Bud*.

¹⁷⁰ 'Our Mutual Scarlet Boulevard', *Boulevard*, p. 65.

¹⁷¹ 'Map, where the year ends', *Boulevard*, p. 27.

¹⁷² *Ranter*, p. 10. *Ranter* is the undoubted epitome of the geographical restlessness which besets MacSweeney's work, preoccupied as it is with distance, maps and the historical conflation of people and places: 'Norsemen used to it / life on land and sea. / Maker of maps / gutter of towns' (p. 8).

Kent', 'are you toiling in a southern field?' 'each friend away / from my outstretched hand',
 'what we have between us, both in miles / and memory. / to finish'.¹⁷³

The dislocation evinced here was for MacSweeney both cultural and private, as his poetry, like that of Ken Smith is populated by wanderers and restless souls who are unable or unwilling to settle in a single location.¹⁷⁴ In 'III' from *Joint Effort* MacSweeney advocates man's need for freedom: 'let a man wander, don't / set him / between trees'¹⁷⁵ and in 'Fools Gold' ironically implies this freedom's restriction: 'You have a licence you / may travel anywhere with / brief motion',¹⁷⁶ and yet the yearning of Ranter's bride for a stable domicile is more typical of the overall sentiment in his work: 'I wandered and wandered, / wouldn't settle / in a place that suits'.¹⁷⁷ The poet's nomadic characters are partly a symptom of his own desire for enigmatic self-representation in the manner of such artistic heroes as Morrison, Kerouac, Dylan and Cash, and romantic notions of the roving outlaw or 'travelling man' inevitably inform his work. Yet the tension and restlessness in MacSweeney's poems betrays the existence of another aspect to this motif, and suggests a deeper motivation stemming from his private concern with the geographical variance of his familial origins, an anxiety which causes even his most secure poetic landscapes to be subject to external threats:

I am terrified of Ireland,
 more so than the broken-down collapse of England,
 because in the Republic Finnbar would be found out

¹⁷³ *Tempers*, p. 278, *Memos*, p. 2, 'Feast of Fashion Burning Down: Zone' from *Horses*, p. 18, 'Victory Over Darkness & The Sunne' from *Horses*, p. 27, *Ranter*, p. 38, *Ranter*, p. 39, 'Wild Knitting' from *Tempers*, p. 272, *Blackbird*, 'Our Mutual Scarlet Boulevard' [10] from *Boulevard*, p. 70, 'The Track, Fervour' from *The Boy*, p. 26, 'A letter to be said, not sent', *Boulevard*, p. 32, respectively.

¹⁷⁴ Paul Batchelor writes of Smith's 'famous sympathy with outcasts and wanderers, a sympathy not based on shared experience so much as attitude, or something in the timbre of the voice itself, a dissipated syntax that marks out territory rather than paints a landscape' ('Inside from the Start', p. 76).

¹⁷⁵ 'III', *Joint Effort*, p. 39.

¹⁷⁶ *Fools Gold*, [12].

¹⁷⁷ *Ranter*, p. 39.

for what he is.¹⁷⁸

The incessant agitation of people and nature in MacSweeney's work, the jarring frictions between locations and the taut lines which intersect his mental map pulling him in opposite directions, are all indicative of the poet's complex wrangling with his cultural identity. For as much as the North East was his habitat, his inspiration and his 'stomping ground', its intensity and that of the other forces operating in his verse, ultimately prevented it from providing him either physical or psychological respite, and it is a sense of restlessness which prevails, as the poet asks: 'Do I ever cease my wandering / in search of sacred song?'¹⁷⁹

The powerful and yet largely unrefined sense of 'Northerness' in MacSweeney's work emerges out of potent antithetical forces and so allies his experience with that of the entire North East, whose modern cultural identity remains a complex and as yet unfixed entity. For unlike the similarly marginalised literary landscapes of Scotland and Wales whose national statuses have afforded their writers a stronger footing from which to rive their literature from the centre, the North East has struggled to disengage itself from a habitually oppositional role that it would have to relinquish in order to realise its independence. The themes of displaced and confused identity in MacSweeney's verse, and the recent rejection by the North East of its own assembly (an incident which Colls and Lancaster acknowledge as a 'sad, if predictable' result, a 'reminder that regional identity is not necessarily the same as political devolution')¹⁸⁰ are manifestations of this uncertainty. Such anxieties impel the disconcerting ambiguities of *The Boy*: 'the children of this town are / not of this town, principally'¹⁸¹ and the diaspora of *Horses*: 'scattered communities from every corner of the earth / We went from one place to the other making them ours without quarter'.¹⁸² Whilst the allusions to London in his work

¹⁷⁸ 'Himself Bright Starre Northern Within, *Demons*, pp. 79-80.

¹⁷⁹ 'My Former Darling Country Wrong or Wrong', *Postcards*.

¹⁸⁰ Colls/Lancaster, viii-x.

¹⁸¹ '& The Biggest Bridge is Forty Feet Long', *The Boy*, p. 31.

¹⁸² 'I Love You But No', *Horses*, p. 58.

that consciously evoke both a region-wide awareness of the North East's political polarity with the capital, and his own personal struggle to distinguish his identity from that of an aggressive parent whom he described in 'The Last Bud' as lingering 'on / this side of breath with the tenacity of a rat' are distinctly double-edged.¹⁸³ That the poet was able to activate the parallels between his own experience and the North East's battle with its beleaguered identity undoubtedly enhanced the explication of both in his work, and whilst his sense of self was often in a state of anxious flux, his belief in the existence of a strong Northern 'nature' and consciousness provided him with a grounding and possibly even more tangible notion of identity, one which was fundamental to his verse.

¹⁸³ 'The Last Bud' [1], *The Last Bud*.

Part Two: Urban Landscapes

Chapter Four: The Literary Context of MacSweeney's Poetic 'Newcastle'

the city dwells as much in us as we in it. It lives as fully in the imagination as in the material world [...] We cannot pretend to know, from the study of literary texts, the actual Paris of Baudelaire or the London of Blake, Wordsworth, or Eliot. But through our reading we can begin to understand how these cities were perceived by the poets who lived in them, and also how the literary representation of that perception has been shaped by earlier texts about the city.¹

In the first half of this study I explored both the minutiae and breadth of Barry MacSweeney's rural North East touching frequently (if necessarily selectively) upon the diverse literary influences that enabled him to develop his understanding of this landscape and articulate his own intensely felt relation to it. From Anglo-Saxon verse forms to the naturalist approach of Clare; from his battles with Basil Bunting's authoritative presence to his admiration for Frank O'Hara's naming techniques, I examined some of the pre-existing approaches to the poetry of place that helped to shape his own personal vistas. Yet while MacSweeney's rural landscapes have been critically evaluated by Clive Bush and Harriet Tarlo among others, no analogous consideration has been accorded to another important geographical focus in his work: his depictions of his native city of Newcastle upon Tyne.² This is not to say that the poet's urban North East has been ignored, for both John Wilkinson in 'A Single Striking Soviet' and Paul Batchelor in 'Morphic Cubism' have briefly addressed the effects achieved by MacSweeney in relocating poems from 'Paris to Newcastle'³ and Peter Manson has described the setting of

¹ William Chapman Sharpe, *Unreal Cities: Urban Figuration in Wordsworth, Baudelaire, Whitman, Eliot and Williams* (Baltimore and London: John Hopkins University Press, 1990), xi.

² Harriet Tarlo, 'Radical Landscapes', Clive Bush, 'Parts in the Weal'.

³ Paul Batchelor: 'Morphic Cubism', John Wilkinson, 'A Single Striking Soviet: The Poems of Barry MacSweeney', in *The Lyric Touch: Essays on the Poetry of Excess* (Cambridge: Salt Publishing, 2007), pp. 77-96 (first publ. as 'The Tempers of Hazard part 2: The Poems of Barry MacSweeney' in *Angel Exhaust* 11, Cambridge (Winter 1994), pp. 55-74. Wilkinson notes that: 'his interest in Decadent verse is apparent in some fine translations of Paris into Newcastle' (p. 79)

Memos as ‘an urban Tyneside of Ecstasy dealers and joyriders’.⁴ In addition, Mathew Jarvis has studied the poet’s cultural memory as regards the landscapes of *Memos* and *Pearl*; Peter Barry has approached the former in terms of their ‘baroque, hallucinatory excess’ and Marianne Morris has explored *Jury Vet*, *Liz Hard* and *Wild Knitting* for their fetishist urban violence.⁵ Yet at the time of writing (partly due to the previous unavailability of the poet’s archive work) no devoted analysis has been made of his substantial and adaptive portrayals of Newcastle, or the manner in which his depictions of the city are fraught by conflicts between his anti-provincial impulses and his intrinsic passion for the place, its people and its culture.

MacSweeney’s Newcastle exists in his work as a career-spanning concern. Not in the self-consciously ‘devoted’ manner ascribed by Sean O’Brien to Roy Fisher’s ‘Birmingham’,⁶ or through its lyricist’s fascination with ‘kaleidoscopic’ metropolitan detail, as is the case with O’Hara’s ‘New York’,⁷ but as a primary, inescapable and recurring motif. From the city’s emergence in *The Boy* as a familiar industrial backdrop to adolescent sexual adventure (‘I will come to you / and ask you to pour the Tyne / and the sun’s bangles in your / lips and hair’),⁸ to its function as the catalyst for a studied historical sequence in *Black Torch* (1977); from its use as a geographical touchstone for various dislocated punk-culture images in his mid-point work (‘Pink Lane telegrams / piling / Up in tampon pools’)⁹ to its deployment as a haphazard source of ubiquitous reference in his later compositions: ‘And the Bigg Market up the road on the A1 heaved like a crazed woman’, MacSweeney drew upon a rich reserve of imagery to

⁴ ‘Barry MacSweeney: *Hellhound Memos*’.

⁵ Matthew Jarvis, ‘Presenting the Past: Barry MacSweeney’s Cultural Memory’, *Pretexts: Literary and Cultural Studies*, Vol. 11, No. 2 (2002) 147-57; Peter Barry, ‘Barry MacSweeney *Hellhound Memos*’, in *Contemporary British Poetry and The City* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2000), pp. 67-77; Marianne Morris, ‘The Abused Become the Abusers: The Poetry of Barry MacSweeney’, *Quid* 14 (October 2004), <http://www.barquepress.com/quid14.pdf> [accessed 13 September 2007]

⁶ ‘the great industrial city of Birmingham, to whose massive brick landscapes, blind walls and roadways Fisher has devoted much of his curiosity from the 1950s on’, Sean O’Brien (‘Roy Fisher: 1939 – ’), *The Firebox: Poetry in Britain and Ireland After 1945* (London: Picador, 1998), p. 129.

⁷ ‘That space, in Frank O’Hara’s case, was not only the space of New York School painting but of New York itself, that kaleidoscopic lumber-room where laws of time and space are altered’, John Ashbery, ‘Introduction’ to *The Collected Poems of Frank O’Hara*, ed. by Donald Allen (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995), vii-xi (x).

⁸ ‘To Lyn at Work whose Surname I don’t know’, *The Boy*, p. 2.

⁹ ‘BE A NICE GIRL KISS THE WARDERS’, *Tempers*, p. 252.

construct the various shifting guises in which the city appears in his poems.¹⁰ His envisioning of this familiar and populous urban landscape, in which he resided not as the ruling ‘Prince’ but as one amongst thousands, counterbalanced his remote, inaccessible and ‘private’ Sparty Lea in its existence as a definitively public realm, yet his portrayal of it was also shaped by private tensions consciously absented from his romanticised rural landscapes. This chapter will examine the literary influences that allowed the poet to apprehend and develop what was initially a thorny and paradoxical relationship with the city of his birth. It will outline those stylistic impulses that caused him to veer away from its depiction in his mid-point work, and explore those mature inspirations which led to his reconciliation with the city in *Horses*. It will also contextualise his responses to the locale by drawing on parallels and divergences between his own, and other poetic approaches to Newcastle composed within his lifetime.

Origins and Early Work: Establishing his Context:

In this early twenty-first century, when Newcastle as a cultural hub and poetic subject matter has become almost *de rigueur* for an array of writers, both ‘locals’ and ‘blow-ins’¹¹ who have chosen to represent the city in their recent work, it is perhaps difficult to comprehend that this was not always the case.¹² Amidst a literary climate which has recently generated a regional anthology comprising the work of nearly fifty poets, and when the city’s poetry proffers both a current and pluralised vision of this culturally distinct metropolis; exhibiting a vast range of perspectives and commemorating what, in 1998, MacSweeney termed ‘everyday street circus behaviour’,¹³ one should remember that it has not always been so. Yet in the mid-1960s when MacSweeney began his career, such proliferation in North East verse was near unimaginable. In other provincial quarters the situation for ‘local’ poetry was optimistic. The ‘underground’

¹⁰ ‘The Man who walks’, *Horses*, p. 76.

¹¹ Gordon Burn, *The North of England Home-Service*, 1st paperback edn (London: Faber & Faber, 2004), p. 170.

¹² To which the publication of *North by North-East* and the work of the ‘Poetry Virgins’ has been testament.

¹³ ‘Foreword’ to Paul Summers’ *The Last Bus* (Cullercoats: Iron Press, 1998), p. 7.

thrived, rejecting Movement conservatism, absorbing international influences and promoting an independent, anti-centralist ethos that helped to legitimize ‘regional’ voices and subjects. In diverse urban areas, the ‘British Poetry Revival’ was gaining momentum, propelled by Liverpool’s ‘Mersey Beats’, Henri, McGough and Patten; by Edwin Morgan in Glasgow; Heaney, Mahon and Longley in Belfast; Peter Finch and Chris Torrance in Wales; Roy Fisher in Birmingham and the group of poets connected with ‘Writers Forum’ in London including Bill Griffiths and Maggie O’Sullivan. The popularity of the scene had even begun to affect more widespread opinions as to how poetry should be evaluated, causing critics to move away from the appraisal of Larkin as a Movement poet in favour of championing his colloquialism and ‘regional’ evocations of Hull.¹⁴

Yet despite this fervour, Connie and Tom Pickard’s institution of the Morden Tower readings in 1964, the latter’s much eulogised ‘rediscovery’ of Bunting in the same year and Fulcrum’s publication of *Briggflatts* in 1966, in terms of producing new, young, local talent, Newcastle and the North East was lagging behind. In his 1966 article: ‘Writing: North East’, Rodney Pybus’ list of writers whose work was familiar outside the region was dominated by local elders: ‘Chaplin, Herbert Sutherland, James Mitchell, Catherine Cookson; the poets Basil Bunting, James Kirkup, Francis Scarfe, Tom Pickard; and playwrights Ann Jellicoe and Alan Plater’, and he anxiously conceded that ‘this is a small number of writers for such a relatively large area of the country’.¹⁵ Other estimations of the North East scene at this time seemed to vary, with Michael Schmidt and Grevel Lindop in *British Poetry Since 1960: A Critical Survey* (1972) distrustfully citing the (tellingly misspelt) ‘Mordern Tower precincts’ as a place where poets ‘sow their aesthetic seed in sparse enclosure soil’ and where ‘there

¹⁴ The Revival was also defined by a renewed attitude towards poetry as a more socially inclusive medium, leading to the Albert Hall Poetry Incarnation event in 1965 and the publication of Michael Horowitz’s anthology *Children of Albion* (1969) that included many diverse ‘regional’ poets.

¹⁵ ‘Writing: North-East’, *Stand*, Vol. 8, No. 2 (1966) 11-23

exists a more exclusive elite than any establishment could be'.¹⁶ MacSweeney himself in *Poetry Information* (1974) evaded Mottram's prompts to verify the existence of a 'Newcastle group of poets' at this time, stating instead his awareness of 'a group of writers. It was a very loose thing: everybody had separate interests' (p. 23). In comparison with the remainder of the country the situation was certainly bleak, and caused Pybus to ponder whether the paucity of material recently contributed to Newcastle's *Stand* magazine which dealt with 'regional subjects' intimated that the province itself was not in fact as 'emotionally centripetal' to the consciousness of its inhabitants 'as some would have it believe'. In his gloomy summary, Pybus identified only three new poets considered by the editors of *Stand* to display 'a strong regional consciousness' in compositions 'of a publishable standard'. One of these was Barry MacSweeney.¹⁷

One reason given by Pybus to explain this dearth of local talent was the North East's lack of an enduring literary precedent, there being, he states: 'simply no tradition of written, as opposed to oral, literature in the region'.¹⁸ But if this was the case then, as Bush enquires of MacSweeney: 'How did a young man from Newcastle get into the worlds denied him beyond his designated sphere?'¹⁹ The answer, and what revealed the young poet's potential, is given by Bush as the 'precision' and 'range of the legacy' that he chose for his work. Or, his ability to engage with the local whilst searching outside his close context and discovering ways to address to his industrialised, North East environment through the literary texts he was discovering in adolescence. MacSweeney's diverse inspirations at this time are recorded in his 1968 'autobiography' where he alludes to several telling figures: 'Rimbaud' 'Baudelaire'

¹⁶ 'Introduction', p. 7.

¹⁷ Pybus, pp. 11-12. Although it seems likely that a lack of confidence in the literary validity of the subject matter more than a want of desire to address it may well have been the cause of this imbalance, the situation was bleak compared to the instances of up and coming talents in the rest of the country.

¹⁸ Pybus, p. 12.

¹⁹ Clive Bush, 'Parts in the Weal', p. 304.

‘Laforge’ ‘Bunting’ ‘Pickard and Jon Silkin’, ‘Cros, Corbiere’.²⁰ A binary, and intentionally provocative declaration of influence, embodied on the one hand by contemporaries concerned with North East history, identity and landscape, and on the other by nineteenth-century French symbolists and *poètes maudits*, which was typical of the concurrently domestic, yet radically explorative style which was to characterise MacSweeney’s poetic. Yet whilst John Wilkinson has rather harshly dismissed the poet’s early work as entirely dependent on a pastiche of such figures conducted with ‘the flagrancy of the rip-off artist’,²¹ MacSweeney’s 1967 translations of Verlaine seem to refute this appraisal, conveying not just his seminal passion for French verse, but his ability to imbue his versions with personal modulations. Here, these nuances manifest in his direct identification between a character and place (‘Young & foolish like France’) and in his Beat-inspired use of his own dialect in the interpretation of another’s work: ‘You are on the cot, shagged out’, both crucial features in his poetic delineations of Newcastle.²²

The almost instinctive duality which can be observed here in MacSweeney’s lyric and self-representation can also be traced to his early experience, as he remarked of this period ‘I was involved to some extent with the [Morden] Tower [...] I went to Paris and had a weird time’.²³ His visits to the Tower perpetuated the binary development of his poetic education: ‘I went there, met Tom, met Basil, met the great Beat triumvirate – and that was it for me’,²⁴ as well as bringing him into contact with Pickard: a poet only two years MacSweeney’s senior and of analogous working-class Geordie origin whose debut *High on the Walls*, published a year before MacSweeney’s own *The Boy*, provided a precedent for his attempts to versify the

²⁰ ‘The autobiography of Barry MacSweeney’, *The Boy*.

²¹ ‘A Single Striking Soviet’, p. 78

²² Archive: BM: 1/1: *Birds in the Night*: Poems from the French of Paul Verlaine, 1967. The above quotations are taken from poems 3 & 5 respectively.

²³ *Poetry Information*, p. 23. MacSweeney is speaking of the period when ‘I was working on the *Chronicle* in Newcastle’, which makes him aged 16-17. The Morden Tower in his work signifies Pickard, Bunting and the 1960s Newcastle poetry scene, but just as significantly his encounter with the work of the American Beats, Ginsberg, Corso and Ferlinghetti (p. 26).

²⁴ *Poetry Information*, p. 26.

contemporary city and invited their inevitable comparison. Yet despite such impressions of solidarity, these collections and their authors are little alike. Whilst both claim to have learnt concision from Bunting, only Pickard demonstrates any regular use of it in his work;²⁵ and while each inscribes his familiarity with the city by designating its major concourses ('dusk in Grainger street',²⁶ 'down to / Mosley Street'),²⁷ MacSweeney's cityscapes are more narrative scenery ('I kissed you for the first time in the / middle of the Swing Bridge')²⁸ than the other's aggressive social symbol: 'Remember, the walls of this city / were built by you and me'.²⁹ That the terse relationship between these two was aggravated by their diverging trajectories (MacSweeney left school to undertake a journalistic apprenticeship; Pickard to be a poet on the dole)³⁰ partly explains the younger man's distance from the other's confrontational mode. Yet their stylistic variance was already ingrained, and as Pickard's lyrics narrowly contract to exacerbate the darkest aspects of his violent urban metropolis, MacSweeney's city, even in its infancy, was a far more expansive concern: one inscribed amidst topographical syntheses ('Joan of Arc [...] into / the Tyne [...] Tibetan smell')³¹ and grounded within a self-assumed and directly specified heritage: 'Rimbaud and Verlaine / swaggered in these same alleys'.³²

Both Pickard's and MacSweeney's tentative portrayals of Newcastle anticipate some enduring literary concerns, but their early work is also suggestive of the very different manner in which each man perceived his relationship with the city. In 1968 MacSweeney wrote: 'In

²⁵ 'smoke blowing / in the winds of engines', 'Factory', *High on the Walls*, p. 15.

²⁶ 'At Dusk', *High on the Walls*, p. 12.

²⁷ 'To Lyn at Work whose Surname I don't know', *The Boy*, p. 2.

²⁸ 'Death Go Get Yr Shoes Repaired & Mend Yr Icey Hat', *The Boy*, p. 51.

²⁹ 'To My Friends Who Go', *High on the Walls*, p. 39. Each man's titles also denote their stylistic leanings: MacSweeney's archaic headings suggestive of non-contemporary influence ('For a Pale Time, No Matter') and Pickard's categorical asperity ('Hunga', 'Rape', 'Scrap') stemming from a resolve to represent his individual and specifically 'local' voice.

³⁰ In the interview 'Squire: On Television', Pickard stated: 'As a working-class bloke with no qualifications (I failed the 11 plus and that was the peak of my academic career) and with no skills other than a developed and developing ear for the music of poetry, and with children, I had no choice but the dole'.

³¹ 'Death Go Get Yr Shoes Repaired & Mend Yr Icey Hat', *The Boy*, pp. 50-51.

³² 'The Track, Fervour', *The Boy*, p. 26. Although this poem's physical subject is London/Kent, the line itself is clearly a metaphor for the poetic line which MacSweeney regards himself as writing within.

Newcastle I was always too involved, always leaving pieces of myself against the walls',³³ a sentiment which was part youthful frustration and part affectation in the manner of his idol Chatterton, but which implied that at least until he achieved a structural balance, his physical and psychological proximity to the city acted as a hindrance to its successful portrayal in his verse.³⁴ Whilst Pickard's total absorption in the minutia of the period fuelled his association with a Newcastle of the 1970s and '80s that barely now exists,³⁵ MacSweeney initially upheld a rather evasive authorial perspective and much of *The Boy* is concerned with displaced rather than affirmed identities.³⁶ Where Pickard traded on the intensity of his bond with the city and used this as the impetus for fiercely subjective diatribes against the town's despoilers: 'where we live / shattered smiles / break on haggard faces',³⁷ MacSweeney professed his nomadism: 'I don't like to hang about in places too long'.³⁸ Such traits in MacSweeney's work indicated his anti-provinciality, 'the need to break from a deadening home'³⁹ and his ambitious ideals, but they also derived from necessity in that the gritty, grass-roots collusion on which Pickard (and another contemporary, Keith Armstrong) relied, depended on the exploitation of motifs which were crucially unavailable to the dapper 'mod' college boy with no patriarchal link to the North East.⁴⁰ For whilst in 'Birthplace Bronchitis', Pickard uses his father's locally iconic profession to anchor his identity to that of the region and anticipate his own role as a member of the next downtrodden generation ('Our fathers are coughing up its grimy phlegm / and we will know the taste')⁴¹ MacSweeney consciously absents his Cockney parent (the 'jellied eel

³³ *The Boy*.

³⁴ Chatterton was self-professedly desperate to quit 'Bristol's dingy piles of brick', 'Chatterton's Last Verses' in *Selected Poems*, ed. by Grevel Lindop (Manchester: Carcanet, 2003), p. 94.

³⁵ Despite his famous association with the city and his role in its literary history, Pickard ruled 'himself out' of the recent anthology *North by North-East* 'on the basis that he has not lived in the region since 1974' (Croft/Fuller, p. 7).

³⁶ Although MacSweeney writes fondly of the city, his portrayals here are not especially political, whilst the central themes of this collection are geographical fluidity and lost or unfixed identities.

³⁷ 'The Devil's Destroying Angel Exploded', *Tiepin Eros*, p. 60.

³⁸ *Poetry Information*, p. 22.

³⁹ Clive Bush, 'Parts in the Weal', p. 319.

⁴⁰ Armstrong uses this motif in his poems 'Splinters' and 'My Father Worked on Ships', *Imagined Corners* (Middlesbrough: Smokestack Books, 2004).

⁴¹ 'Birthplace Bronchitis', *Tiepin Eros*, p. 48. The theme is invoked at several points during the course of this anthology, in 'The Devil's Destroying Angel Exploded' ('sleep bairns, shiver now / ya fathers' gold is stolen / strong fathers of a harsh past, despondent now', 'councillor, elected by my father', 'look dozy fathers, look /

traitor`)⁴² from a Newcastle which is his own jealously guarded domain, and which, devoid of such ancestral precedents, he was forced to discover on his own individual terms.

Because he lacked the patriarchal connection to the city that Pickard exploits, and was wary of the 'Bunting-Modernist' line due to its close association with his rival, MacSweeney increasingly strove to define his own literary territory and seek a wider spectrum for his work. In a letter to his mother accompanying a final draft of *The Last Bud* (1969), he signalled the breadth of his admirations in advising a prospective fellow poet to read: *Geography* by Edward Dorn; *Collected Bunting*; Pickard's *High on the Walls*; Lee Harwood's *The White Room*; Gary Snyder's *Mountains and Rivers* and *A Range of Rooms*; Prynne; Gill Vickers; John James; Nick Wayte; Steve Jonas; John Temple ('a Sunderland lad'); Blake; Shelley; Keats; Wordsworth; Chatterton; Clare; Rimbaud; Swinburne; Dante; Rossetti; e.e. cummings and listen to Dylan ('very important').⁴³ This list is as indicative of its epoch and the age of its author as it is of anything else,⁴⁴ but nonetheless imparts an eclectic range of influences, from poets seen at the Morden Tower ('Dorn, Creeley, Trochi, Harwood')⁴⁵ to archetypal teenage idols; from lesser known contemporaries (both North East compatriots and 'working class lads from Somerset and Wales')⁴⁶ to American Beats and English Romantics. He showcases a passion for the marginal and the radically *en vogue* that clearly attracted the

your masters have changed', pp. 59-60); in 'What Can You Do?' ('my father was a railway man', p. 77); at the end of 'Dancing Under Fire' ('father you built the lines I travel on / my direction was laid by your sweat and death / glitter magpie', p. 92) and in 'Dawn Raid on an Orchard' ('we took ripe apples, tasting sweeter for the taking / to fill our dads' redundant bait bags', p. 146).

⁴² 'John Bunyan to Johnny Rotten', *Demons*, p. 103.

⁴³ MacSweeney; 'Letter to Lillian MacSweeney', Archive: BM 1/2. This letter to the poet's mother accompanies a draft manuscript of *The Last Bud* which he had sent to her to read, which dates it to 1968. The advice is intended for Bob Proud. A similarly extensive role-call can be found in *Poetry Information* where MacSweeney occasionally appears to be seeking literary legitimisation through the listing of his contacts to date, as he mentions Robert Duncan, Ed Dorn, Andrew Crozier, Jeremy Prynne, Bob Cobbing, Tom Clark, Jim Burns, Dave Cuncliffe, Tony Jackson, Jon Silkin, Ken Smith, George Tysh, Mathew Mead, Tony Harrison, Allen Ginsberg, Ian Patterson, Corso, John Hall, Tim Longville, John James, Peter Riley, John Temple, Pete Brown, Spike Hawkins, Stuart Montgomery, Connie Pickard and Nick Wayte, in just a few pages of interview (pp. 22-29).

⁴⁴ John Wilkinson observes that *The Boy* 'amounts to an anthology of the poetic fashions of its time (1965-68)', although these lists suggest that MacSweeney's inspirations were also personal and 'local' ('A Single Striking Soviet', p. 78).

⁴⁵ MacSweeney; *High on the Walls: A Morden Tower Anthology*, p. 86.

⁴⁶ *Poetry Information*, p. 29.

notice of his first publishers. Such multitudinous influence is, however, also reflected in the stylistic uncertainties, mixed metres and diverse artistic tributes of *The Boy* (he name checks Lorca, Van Gogh, Gauguin, Rousseau, Nijinsky and Sergei [Yesenin] amongst others) in which Newcastle – although a definite presence – is tentatively explored amidst a variety of parody and form. From the clumsy Coleridge allusion: ‘Water on the steps in the dining room / but none to make a cup of tea’⁴⁷ to the quasi-Symbolist observation of the urban multitude: ‘I examine the life-pushers at work, industrious as the dung-pushing scarab’,⁴⁸ MacSweeney juggles an overwhelming profusion of progenitors, myriad influences which divulge a desire to express his own erudite diversity, and which are clearly echoed in these poems’ self-questioning themes: ‘walking past the GREEN MARKET i saw you no / it was a vision’.⁴⁹

As reluctant as MacSweeney seemed to be to dedicate his allegiance to any particular precedent (Wilkinson notes his ‘courageous forfeiture of the rewards any one of a number of earlier guises might have brought’),⁵⁰ he had, by role-calling his associates and inspirations, at least made his broad inclinations clear, and certainly following his failed nomination for the Oxford Chair had verified his criteria: rejecting mainstream, ‘populist’ forms of contemporary poetry and embracing influences connected with the ‘counter-culture’ scene and its celebrated idols. From his earliest publication where a concern with subversive Russian literature is signified by citations of ‘Voznesensky’ and ‘Lermontov’ and also practically realised in the use of miscellaneous juxtaposed detail (‘so sunny [...] I have yr photograph [...] tinsel & bonnie lights’),⁵¹ and privately resonant imagery: ‘coolest stars are blue’ equates Newcastle’s

⁴⁷ ‘Mens Palace, Dogs Bank, Newcastle’, *The Boy*, p. 32, echoes ‘The Rhyme of the Ancient Mariner’.

⁴⁸ ‘The Temper’, *The Boy*, p. 40.

⁴⁹ ‘After Breakfast (With Peter) Costing 5/6d.’, *The Boy*, p. 49.

⁵⁰ ‘A Single Striking Soviet’, p. 77. Although this is obviously conjectured as such a move could easily have made MacSweeney into a far worse and probably less interesting poet.

⁵¹ ‘After Breakfast (With Peter) Costing 5/6d’, *The Boy*, p. 49. ‘In general, Voznesensky stands out among the other young poets in the Soviet Union for the resourcefulness with which he handles language [...] Where necessary for his poetic purposes, he never hesitates to introduce slang, neologisms, and the jargon of modern technology’, Anon, ‘Pen Russia’, http://www.penrussia.org/n-z/an_voz.htm [accessed 17 September 2007].

night sky with the poet's taste for alcohol in the emblem of the city's brewery.⁵² With allusions to Blake ('Tygers')⁵³ and the similarly dissenting Villon ('a posse of *flics* at his back'),⁵⁴ MacSweeney's adolescent work is dense with intimations of the radical traditions in which he saw his own urban lyric. It was this aspiration to artistically aggravate, to juxtapose disparate literary characters, philosophies and movements (and to counter Pickard's Morden Tower by spearheading his own artistic confluence) that prompted him to organise the Sparty Lea Festival in 1967. MacSweeney claimed this gathering 'did formalise things' poetically for him, but it also placed him in close quarters with a group of 'alternative' poets whose influence and 'new ideas' reinforced his dislocation from the mainstream and exacerbated his frustration with the intractability of the older generation, leading to his 'first row with Jon Silkin' whom he dismissed in 1974 as being 'rooted back in the '50s'.⁵⁵ That the limitations of the past era's practices were apparent to MacSweeney even before he found the means to supersede them is manifest in the frustration inherent in another line from *The Boy*: 'it was all the same places, the same bars, / the same beer, the regular bridges and familiar / streets and churches and the same people. / But believe me when I say it was different.'⁵⁶

At the time he was interviewed for *Poetry Information* in 1974, MacSweeney had just undertaken a prolific period of publishing (producing *Brother Wolf*, *Fools Gold*, *Five Odes* and *Dance Steps* in a single year), and his assertive self-confidence is implicit in the remarks above. Yet even so, his comments here are prescient in their explication of the experimental traditions in which he regarded his own work, and of his specific interpretation of the defiant underground spirit of the age. None more so than his assertion of antipathy towards some of the renowned 'place' poets of the 'Revival', when he claimed that at the age of 17 and despite having been greenly 'willing to listen to anybody', he also:

⁵² 'Death Go Get Yr Shoes Repaired & Mend Yr Icey Hat', *The Boy*, p. 50.

⁵³ 'Exotic', *The Boy*, p. 41.

⁵⁴ 'Saffron Walden Blues, at the Pond House', *Boulevard*, p. 39.

⁵⁵ *Poetry Information*, pp. 30-31.

⁵⁶ 'Death Go Get Yr Shoes Repaired & Mend Yr Icey Hat', *The Boy*, p. 51.

knew one thing: that I didn't like what the Liverpool poets were doing. I knew that was just too light for me. I was too much embedded in the land, the environment, the politics, from my kind of background in Newcastle, and in the artistic intellectual activity that was going on at the Morden Tower, to be drawn by that',⁵⁷

Whether a faithful recollection or one coloured by retrospection – by Hutchinson's demand for another collection as saleable as *The Boy* for instance – this remark constitutes one of the first of many examples of MacSweeney's rejection of popular forms, possibly on the basis of popularity alone.⁵⁸ For MacSweeney, it appeared, the underground and marginal were never subversive or challenging enough, and from an early stage he embraced the role of outsider in an already marginalised field. He obtusely championed Morrison over Dylan; Chatterton over Rimbaud; rejected academe but evoked his relationship with J.H. Prynne in: 'Saffron Walden Blues, at the Pond House, *for Jeremy Prynne*';⁵⁹ broke away from the 'local' and yet returned repeatedly to it in his work. MacSweeney's prime directive, however, was to distance himself wherever possible from the fashionable in literature, and from the corollary that he regarded as false poetic sentiment, a stance which placed him – contrary to Wilkinson's discernment of 'replica Liverpool poetry' in *The Boy*⁶⁰ – in direct opposition to the 'street' verse of Henri, Pattern and McGough, and much later contributed to his portrayal of Simon Armitage as the poet artificially trading on his northern persona: 'hands in the pockets of his suit in Paris', 'half a pound of badly-fried chips on each shoulder'. This cutting exposé, irrespective of its anti-establishment vitriol ('we want new sounds not neat Faber & Faber') articulated all those elements of provincial poetry which MacSweeney himself was determined to resist.⁶¹

⁵⁷ *Poetry Information*, p. 30.

⁵⁸ Wilkinson addresses MacSweeney's abhorrence for group affiliation in 'A Single Striking Soviet': 'Any stability of integrated identity which might be offered through a belonging, seems to be subject to especially virulent attack' (p. 83).

⁵⁹ *Boulevard*, p. 39.

⁶⁰ 'A Single Striking Soviet', p. 78.

⁶¹ *Victory Over Darkness & The Sunne, Horses*, p. 28. This characterisation of Armitage is ironic in that MacSweeney was a renowned affecter of the poet persona, although he differentiated in regarding his own calling as genuine, that of others and those who defected to the mainstream, not so.

Mid Point Work: Olson and the Radicals:

Inspired by both Russian and American experimentalism and indisposed toward the British establishment, MacSweeney was possessed with strong political and poetic intent but little focus ('a pointer is set, in no path or direction')⁶² until his introduction by Prynne to the ideas of Olson and the principles of 'projective verse' prompted a major overhaul in his reading of place and the way he approached it in his work. Again, in *Poetry Information* he recalls this epiphany, describing his previous stylistic foibles ('my early poems are just [...] imitations of an echo I'd caught from Carlos Williams [...] bad little lyrical-erotic stuff'), and articulating his continued commitment to his urban subject.⁶³

I'd never heard of Charles Olson, and I heard about Charles Olson at Sparty Lea [...] "projective verse" [...] for me it was like flinging language out beyond the self [...] Up to then I didn't really know how I could write about politics, my geographical, historical and social heritage [...] The local, the centre, which was my energy, what I am [...] I failed before, many times, trying to write poetry about the geography of Newcastle, the history of Newcastle. It wasn't until then that suddenly a massive vista opened up.⁶⁴

For MacSweeney, 'projective verse', which he interprets as 'not using sentences, breaking up, working with the breath', 'taking language outside of the ego, the self [...] suddenly realising that all that land is out there',⁶⁵ seems to provide the necessary means to organise the indistinct, plural localities of his first collection and transform the autobiographical Newcastle of 'Death Go Get Yr Shoes Repaired & Mend Yr Icey Hat' ('& after both deciding not to jump into / the Tyne, content with spitting in it, we / walked off in the February frost')⁶⁶ into the historically aware and referentially diverse city of *Our Mutual Scarlet Boulevard's* 'Map, etcetera': 'Pons Elia (pseudonym) / has cleared the temples of gods [...] OCELLUS, / eye of

⁶² 'Boulevard', *Boulevard*, p. 65.

⁶³ MacSweeney, *Poetry Information*, p. 30.

⁶⁴ MacSweeney, Interview with Eric Mottram, *Poetry Information*, p. 30.

⁶⁵ Ibid.

⁶⁶ *The Boy*, p. 50.

the north, hearth that warmeth / the south parts of this kingdom with fire'.⁶⁷ It is this new, inclusive perspective which prompts him to imagine the city as an integrative socio-political element of the wider historical landscape: 'Monkchester trembles. / alder hills slope to the Raven banner'.⁶⁸ and marks a shift in his poetic that is endorsed by Bush whose essay 'Parts in the Weal' dubs *Boulevard* (1971) MacSweeney's 'first major collection'. Bush's decision to dismiss MacSweeney's earlier work in this manner infers that he finds little of worth in his writing prior to the Olson influence, it being devoid of the 'transcendental questions involving a geographic cosmology and sense of place' that he perceives from *Viareggio* onwards.⁶⁹

Despite spending much of the *Poetry Information* interview commending both Olson's parataxis, 'breaking habits of form', and Bunting's 'real economy', MacSweeney professed in a 1977 amendment that 'Far from abandoning a more linear style' he had subsequently embarked 'on linear and nodal poems' and begun 'drawing on the political / social activity of Northumbrian and Durham miners [...] and the trial of T. Dan Smith'.⁷⁰ This development implies that it was less his antecedents' structural ethics and more their localising concerns that affected his mid-point work. Whilst Bunting's terse line is used by the poet in *Brother Wolf* (1972) and *Blackbird* (1980), it is more his concern with how each nuance of local history impacts upon the development of an environment which typifies these works ('sand mingled with blood of lies')⁷¹ and which is embedded in the rich narratives of *Black Torch*:

dogs in the city

kennelled

in velvet

⁶⁷ *Boulevard*, p. 25. And in other works concerned with 'local energy' which are situated between pages 26-56 in this collection.

⁶⁸ 'Map, wall to wall', *Boulevard*, p. 28.

⁶⁹ Bush, 'Parts in the Weal', p. 308. Bush later amended this omission with the publication of 'The Romantic Poets and the Early Poetry of Barry MacSweeney' (*Poetry Now: Contemporary British and Irish Poetry in the Making*, Holger Michael Klein, Sabine Coelsh-Foisner, Wolfgang Gortschacher [Eds.], Tübingen, 1999, pp. 317-31).

⁷⁰ 'Postscript', *Poetry Information*, p. 39.

⁷¹ *Blackbird*.

children moaned as their fathers
 brothers and uncles were brought out on stretchers
 of wood and cloth
 [...]

curs
 without names
 hidden deep in Ponteland
 pillaging the city
 invisibled.⁷²

Moreover, whilst Olson's projective notions can be identified in the collage construction of MacSweeney's 'Map' poems ('875 A.D. / church fell.'), 'Map, wall to wall' is one of the only examples of verse to be clarified by a 'Note': '*Teams*, a tributary of the Tyne, by Blaydon'.⁷³ This feature divulges the poet's need to situate his work and suggests his greater inspiration by Olson's avowal that he was 'a particularist [...] a localist [...] a continentalist', and by that poet's self-analytical explication of a lyric about 'the city of my birth': 'I never wrote about Gloucester like this. Do you think? I've been wrong all this time. I belong in [...] My subject is Worcester. Shit. Isn't it amazing? I mean, how long does it take?'.⁷⁴ Olson's sentiment here, which not only posits the existence of a fundamental connection between a poet and their native place, but infers the indigène's particular ability to capture the form of that place in a uniquely perceptive manner, is vital to MacSweeney's concept of his rapport with his city, and contributed to the direct correlations he constructed in lines such as: 'I am going to be [...] a town to myself / Eventually I'll be a city and a citadel. Newcastle'.⁷⁵

⁷² Archive; BM 1/14/8: *Black Torch*, New London Pride, December 1977, p. 22.

⁷³ 'Map, wall to wall', *Boulevard*, p. 28.

⁷⁴ *Charles Olson Reading at Berkeley*, transcribed by Zoë Brown (San Francisco: Coyote, 1966), pp. 5-7. This text was encountered in its recorded form by MacSweeney at the Sparty Lea Festival in 1967: 'Jeremy Prynne played the OLSON AT BERKELEY tape, and had the booklet there; I read that, and I was very interested and energised by that, which was something I hadn't seen in English poetry'. *Poetry Information*, p. 30.

⁷⁵ 'Lazy Susan's blockbusters', Archive; BM: 1/19/3.

Yet whilst Olson's stimulating philosophies had a seminal impact on MacSweeney by widening his scope and providing him a new and authoritative stance from which to assess his relationship with Newcastle, his influence by the tenets of 'projective verse' simultaneously emerged, alongside a raft of other factors, as an important cause of his move away from the focussed, linear poetry of place towards a more culturally and geographically dissonant style. This linguistically composite verse, captured in *Fools Gold* (1972), *Five Odes* (1972), *Six Odes* (1973), *Fog Eye* (1973), *Far Cliff Babylon* (1978), *Odes* (1978), 'Jury Vet' (1979-81), 'Liz Hard' and 'Liz Hard II' (1982) reflected MacSweeney's increasing affiliation with the radical elements of the poetry scene, and is more concerned with jarring imagistic amalgams than with the dedicated explication of particular place.⁷⁶ The pop-culture references ('join the Startrek Crew. Spandau Ballet / on a council tenancy'),⁷⁷ violent sexual imagery and bulletin formats ('*BIZZARE SHOES IN SEX DEATH*')⁷⁸ that characterise this verse, disclose the poet's influence by the shock-tactics of punk, his anti-establishment determination to use extremist vocabularies, and a passionate distaste for national politics and culture which inspired him to compose a series of 'State of the Nation' poems articulating his severe misgivings apropos 'Albion's collapsed and mental tones'.⁷⁹ In this work, pop-culture is used to discordant effect to envisage Newcastle, 'the city of my / birth' in the socio-politically charged terminology of Bob Marley: 'your natty dread future is a dole card'.⁸⁰ Headlines and television newsreel are used to create a bewilderment of pluralised textual voices ("our correspondent says"), to conjure a revolutionary social context: 'newsreel flickers [...] Sorbonne students hoy parking meters';⁸¹ to expose a sick society and the media which

⁷⁶ In fact much of the work collected in the ill-fated 1993 anthology *The Tempers of Hazard*, which perhaps significantly contains only 'Finnbar's Lament' from what may be termed MacSweeney's more accessible work of this period.

⁷⁷ 'Wild Knitting', *Tempers*, p. 269.

⁷⁸ 'Liz Tough Smacks the Newsdesk Hard', *Tempers*, p. 216.

⁷⁹ 'Revulsion: (Torvill & Dean)', Archive: BM: 1/17/1.

⁸⁰ 'Far Cliff Babylon', *Odes 1971-78*, p. 57. 'Natty Dread' acknowledges the title of politically charged 1974 album by Bob Marley and The Wailers, although political situation to which it relates is very far removed from Newcastle. This purposely provocative image also anticipates the later and likewise discordant: 'Johnny Cash' at 'Eldon Square' (Six O' Clock', Archive: BM: 1/20/1)

⁸¹ 'Black Torch Sunrise', *Wolf Tongue*, p. 74.

glamorises it ('MURDER FOR BREAKFAST') and satirise the poet's despised journalistic profession: 'BLITZKRIEG / DEADLINE SPEWSHIFT'.⁸² In the face of such all-consuming concerns, Newcastle as a specific topic inevitably faded from MacSweeney's work, and in many mid-point poems the city barely exists unless in unspecific snapshots of a corrupt modern cityscape: 'glue dribblets pocking baby's face',⁸³ 'pandas burn and blaze in the stinking urban wind'.⁸⁴

MacSweeney's attitude at this point, towards society and concerning the verse-politics of the era, is further elucidated in Peter Barry's *Poetry Wars*. Citing a report from a Poetry Society meeting, Barry illustrates MacSweeney's continued resistance to popular conservative figures: 'There were many extremely prejudiced statements as to the sort of poetry that the Society should encourage. In the charming phraseology of Mr Barry MacSweeney "We want no Kingsley-f...ing-Amis here"'.⁸⁵ Barry also includes MacSweeney's telling explanation for his resignation from the Society: "'I've done too much compromising and my skull won't take anymore'"⁸⁶ and a manifesto from the period when he was Chair, which promotes poetry with "'a direct social function in the perpetual alteration of the status quo,'"⁸⁷ commitments which necessarily precluded any consistent engagement with the 'local' in his work.⁸⁸ While unpublished poems such as 'Mizzle Through Slats' and 'Geordieus Unbound' combined a broad regional historicism borne from Olson's localist leanings and a radicalism drawn from the anarchic zeitgeist to reveal Newcastle's continued existence as an inveterate concern:

⁸² '((LIZ TOUGH SMACKS THE NEWSDESK HARD))', *Tempers*, p. 216.

⁸³ STOP PRESS. JURY VET DISMISSAL SHOCK. TRIAL ABANDONED', *Tempers*, p. 237.

⁸⁴ 'SOCIAL WORK TODAY: JURY VET SCANS THE RIOTS', *Tempers*, p. 250. There is some sense in MacSweeney's references from this period that he continued to retain the local as a reflexive paradigm, exploiting witnessed incidents and projecting his observations outwards to comment on the nation as a whole: 'Their / heroes are red and their traitors / yellow, / Dan Smith fruit skin' ('Far Cliff Babylon', *Wolf Tongue*, p. 79).

⁸⁵ Peter Barry, *Poetry Wars: British Poetry of the 1970s and the Battle of Earls Court* (Cambridge: Salt Publishing, 2006), p. 82.

⁸⁶ Ibid, p. 96. Barry remarks that 'nobody who knew MacSweeney would imagine him temperamentally capable of following a conciliatory Lee Harwood line for long'.

⁸⁷ Ibid, pp. 82-3.

⁸⁸ A period of experimentation to which he perhaps refers in 'Sweeno, Sweeno': 'Then Sweeno's far-out mind went underground into / every-ravaged corner he could find that no-one else had touched' (*Demons*, p. 89).

‘canny descendants! / Unravelling today’s petrified shite’,⁸⁹ his published work retained only sporadic allusions to the city, and these often partial or cloaked: ‘nunnery / soaked in slime. Pink Lane telegrams’⁹⁰ The unusually linear ‘Black Torch Sunrise’ also seems to lambaste the narrow practices of his fellow ‘Newcastle poets’, avowing not regional community but a separating distance as they shoulder old-fashioned weapons amidst defunct industrial remains, an ancient Bunting translates an even more antique poet in a remote hamlet, and Pickard engages in the self-defeating act of ramming a ‘battered arts council landrover / into cathedral snowdrifts’. The author’s own role in the poem is notably distinct, clandestine and aggressive in its modernity:

I deal in secret financial reports
 [...]
 manpower utilisation documents
 council Deep-Throats with secrets to tell
 I must protect my sources
 to weld Press trivia
 in low-key suburban rags,⁹¹

Although only peripherally significant to MacSweeney’s literary relationship with his native city, his parallel influence by Prynne and McClure nonetheless constitutes a crucial index for understanding why Newcastle temporarily disappeared from his verse. For whilst the influence of Prynne’s hermetic linguistics is often recognised in MacSweeney’s mid-point poems, his bearing on the latter’s understanding of his regional identity is restricted to some broad themes. The value which Prynne places on ‘historical layers’ and ‘accrued meanings’

⁸⁹ ‘Geordieus Unbound’, Archive: BM: 2/2.

⁹⁰ ‘BE A NICE GIRL KISS THE WARDERS’, *Tempers*, p. 252.

⁹¹ ‘Newcastle poets / aim pearl-inlaid shotguns / on Allendale and Nenthead fells / heads down behind / desolate lead workings [...] Bunting translates Catullus / in Wylam / old as the century. / Pickard lams battered arts council landrover / into cathedral snowdrifts / on bitter dale hillspine - / rural economics are a laugh / if you don’t compensate / for snow’, *Wolf Tongue*, pp. 76-7.

in language⁹² is traceable in MacSweeney's approach to the evolution of his native dialect and its link to the enduring identity of the region: 'iron words / fire words / survival language'.⁹³ Whilst in accord with Bunting's anti-centralist notions, Prynne's influence may also be traced in MacSweeney's tactically localised use of the idea that 'freed from a unitary, closed system, "great tradition" view of culture, the margin could legitimately be seen as the centre',⁹⁴ which enhanced the emblematic conflict between London and Newcastle to the detriment of the capital in his work: 'You stupid women in London / Up here I need leather shoes to keep out the rain'.⁹⁵ Yet the discrepancies between MacSweeney's 'real' and professed influences and his desire to challenge notions of poetic obligation are a concern here. For whilst a partiality for those who tested the boundaries of what was possible in poetry cemented his longstanding association with Prynne, whose friendship he often cited in his work⁹⁶ and whose exploitation of the natural, social and political possibilities inherent in language is used in the grotesque cityscapes of *Jury Vet*: 'spit pools. Gob / runs, pension becks',⁹⁷ the formal construction of this sequence is more beholden to the work of Mike McClure. This poet's numerical listings ('triumph now. 9. Your hair a flag'),⁹⁸ capitalisations ('pen & FILES')⁹⁹ centred texts and enjambments ('bring / me / Home') are all apparent in this mid-point work,¹⁰⁰ exemplifying the type and range of the theoretical concerns which MacSweeney was juggling in his attempt to achieve poetical exigency and political vitality.

⁹² Robert Potts, 'Through the Oval Window', *Guardian*; 10 April 2004, <http://books.guardian.co.uk/poetry/features/0,12887,1189134,00.html> [accessed 13 September 2007]

⁹³ *Blackbird*.

⁹⁴ 'Gordon Burn, 'Message in a Bottle'. This being most evident in the complex *Jury Vet* poems and in the *Odes*.

⁹⁵ 'When I lie about my age in the sequence', Archive: BM 1/18/2: *Pearl* (Draft B).

⁹⁶ 'Cumin seeds in a brass saucer in Prynne's living room!' ('Ode and Elegy: Fidel I'm here!' (Song of the Cuban Niggers), Archive: BM: 2/10/5.

⁹⁷ 'STOP PRESS. JURY VET DISMISSAL SHOCK. TRIAL ABANDONED', *Tempers*, p. 237.

⁹⁸ 'Wild Knitting', *Tempers*, p. 272.

⁹⁹ 'JURY VET'S ODE TO PASSION', *Tempers*, p. 251.

¹⁰⁰ 'JURY VET MEETS CANDACE BAHOUTH', *Tempers*, p. 237. MacSweeney enjoyed subverting notions of influence, and mixing the language of Prynne with the metre of McClure was undoubtedly intended to provoke confusion, avoid being categorised and display his wide-ranging erudite influences.

Late Work: Absorbing Influences and Reconciling Paradigms:

Following ‘Colonel B’ in 1980, MacSweeney publications became less prolific, and those that did appear showed a significant deviation from his previous style. Yet what does emerge in both *Ranter* (1985) and *Memos* (1993), is a sense of what his mid-point work had achieved in terms of organising and developing many of his fundamental preoccupations: issues of sexual exploitation, the lexicons of the fashion industry, political corruption, media censorship and social disintegration, which were then reinvigorated when his return to more linear, accessible forms enabled him to re-establish his connection with the local zeitgeist. In these sequences the city of Newcastle, detached from the radical ire which fuelled the satire of ‘Geordieus’, is more defeated than defiant, riddled with loss and social dislocation: ‘the grit / in its windows and eyes’,¹⁰¹ and redolent of a dark period for MacSweeney following his composition of ‘Finnbar’s Lament’ when he had ‘writer’s block for four years’.¹⁰² In *Memos* particularly, his work recalls a Baudelairean tradition of city poetry consumed with mental loneliness and the human devastation engendered by modern urban existence: ‘once more we enter the falsedom [...] attracted by automatic defrost function’.¹⁰³ The civic anxieties in these poems are embodied by his ‘glue-sniffer sprawled / unconscious in Hood Street’,¹⁰⁴ and in examinations of the decaying social fabric in *Memos* which, as Nicholas Johnson recalls, was spurred by the specifically local occurrence of ‘the death of a teenager in the Meadowell riots’.¹⁰⁵ Especially significant however, is the way in which such foci mirror the desolate themes of other local verse of the late 1980s and early 1990s, from Gillian Allnutt’s portrayal of denizens thwarted and crushed by their urban environment in ‘About Benwell’ (‘people with faces like broken promises’, ‘kids like saplings planted by the Council’)¹⁰⁶ to Cooper’s later city centre drunk:

¹⁰¹ ‘Vapour rises’, *Memos*, p. 23.

¹⁰² Interview/conversation with Maggie O’Sullivan, circa 1993, (audio recording), transcribed by Paul Batchelor.

¹⁰³ ‘Vapour rises’, *Memos*, p. 23.

¹⁰⁴ ‘Linda Manning is a Whore’, *Memos*, p. 15.

¹⁰⁵ ‘Barry MacSweeney: An Appreciation’.

¹⁰⁶ *Blackthorn* (Newcastle upon Tyne: Bloodaxe Books, 1994), p. 21.

‘the invisible man [...] needing / what we all need, money to die’.¹⁰⁷ Such similarities reveal MacSweeney’s reconnection with his regional contemporaries and with the city itself.

Both *Ranter* and *Memos* are redolent of MacSweeney’s mature willingness to explore other, often more formal poetic structures and themes. According to Douglas Clark, *Ranter*’s effectiveness lies in the fact that MacSweeney ‘sacrifices the artifices of his vocabulary to tell the tale’¹⁰⁸ – a welcome boon for those who had struggled with his mid-point work – but it also results from his refreshing and distinctive use of the rhythms and scansion of Old English verse: ‘*back on my own ground / blade in your heart*’.¹⁰⁹ MacSweeney’s writing here also began to exhibit signs of his acquaintance with the preoccupations of nineteenth century city poetry, and his later depictions of Newcastle are rife with allusions to a sexualised, consumer-driven urban environment (‘the wipeaway lipstick universe of hearts on fire [...] full range of hostess trolleys available’)¹¹⁰ and to the city as a negative, corrupting counterpoint to rural life. Examples of this dialectic, where ‘the external, prosaic, themeless world of city and factory’ constitutes a ‘negative reference with respect to the poet’s much more important experience of nature’¹¹¹ exist in archive poems related to both *Memos* and *Pearl*, inferring MacSweeney’s disillusionment with urban existence: ‘The wind is beautiful tonight, Jac [...] amazing the fjords / ignored by the party people of Newcastle upon Tyne’;¹¹² ‘They have smelled the city perfume from the passing coach’.¹¹³ Increasingly in this later verse there also emerge descendents of the Baudelairean *passante* and Blakean ‘Harlot’ signifying the poet’s conception of the landscape as an arena of sexual encounter, as he developed this figure from

¹⁰⁷ Bob Cooper, ‘Travelling Out’ [1], *All We Know Is All We See* (Darlington: Arrowhead Press, 2002), p. 70.

¹⁰⁸ ‘A Lifetime of Poetry’.

¹⁰⁹ *Ranter*, p. 34.

¹¹⁰ ‘Rake them from their Bunks’ (a draft which was developed into the last poem in *Memos*: ‘Vapour rises from the ducts and flues’), Archive: BM: 1/17/1.

¹¹¹ John H Johnston, *The Poet and The City: A Study in Urban Perspectives* (Athens: The University of Georgia Press, 1984), p. 87.

¹¹² ‘The wind is beautiful tonight, Jac’, Archive; BM 1/18/2: Pearl (Draft B).

¹¹³ ‘Rake Them from their Bunks’; Archive: BM: 1/17/1.

Boulevard's anonymous 'blonde striptease'¹¹⁴ to the far more idiosyncratic 'Germaine Karen' whose 'wonderful legs – have / struck the passing of my romantic fancies' in *Horses*.¹¹⁵ The insistent equations in his mid-point work between city life and stark, often aberrant sexuality formed a base for his later renditions of Newcastle as a sexual territory in *Memos* and *Horses*: a theme deftly 'localised' in the latter by his exploitation of the perception of Geordie females in his translation of the 'sirènes' and 'belles' from Apollinaire's 'La Chanson du Mal-Aimé' into the specific 'white-dressed and tattooed dollies [...] eventually heading for death I hate to say arrayed with single red roses'.¹¹⁶

The shifting nature of MacSweeney's relationship with his literary Newcastle in this later work caused his poetic perspective to waver between the two traditional vantage points identifiable within city poetry from the eighteenth century onwards. He balances between the internal, implicated vision of the individual chronicler amidst the urban cacophony (whether willingly so as with O'Hara, or as a result of mental self-entrapment as with Baudelaire) and the disassociated stance of the external observer, deliberately separated from the masses in order to examine their activity, register difference (Wordsworth) or, like Williams, recognise the city as 'a dangerous, inexplicable compound' awash with both 'miracle and atrocity'.¹¹⁷ That this polarity can be extended to include issues of native and non-native allegiance – often crucially distinct perspectives in Newcastle poetry (with Harrison the spectating Wordsworth and Pickard the stifled Baudelaire?) adds further intrigue to this flux, not least because MacSweeney was later – and is arguably now more widely – known for his lyrical affiliation to a locale not natively his in the hamlet of Sparty Lea. This peculiarity, which complicates issues of associative topographical identity and the designation of 'home' in his work, leads

¹¹⁴ 'Sonnet', *Boulevard*, p. 62.

¹¹⁵ 'Fancy Nancy', *Horses*, p. 72.

¹¹⁶ 'I Love You But No', *Horses*, p. 59. The lines in Apollinaire's poem which MacSweeney structurally mirrors are rather ambiguous: 'Te fuient ô bûcher divin qu'ornent / Des astres des fleurs du matin', although Oliver Bernard brings the meaning closer to MacSweeney's version in translating it as: 'To flee the place where maids adorn / With asphodels the funeral stakes', Guillaume Apollinaire, *Selected Poems*, trans. & intro. by Oliver Bernard (London: Anvil Press Poetry, 1986), p. 47. Hereafter referred to as Apollinaire, *Selected Poems*.

¹¹⁷ Johnston, *The Poet and the City*, p. 204.

him to perceive Newcastle from without and within, so that in large sections of his verse MacSweeney uses Sparty Lea as an emotional crux and signifier for belonging, and renders his poetic relationship with Newcastle at once collusive and undermined:

we step right over the glue and flung bad chips

[...]

I long for the cry of all the wild birds I know

[...]

the funny little paths which descend from Burnhope Reservoir to Carr Shield down.¹¹⁸

Again here, MacSweeney is prefigured by the work of some notable antecedents: the Long Island born Whitman so enthralled by an adjacent conurbation that ‘he speaks of himself as a “son” of Manhattan and refers to it lovingly as “my city”’,¹¹⁹ by the recurrently influential Olson who often addressed Gloucester, Massachusetts in his work whilst ignoring his home 63 miles away; and inevitably by Bunting, originally from Scotswood but lyrically connected with the hamlet of Brigflatts where, much like MacSweeney, he spent holidays as a child.

Although not a ‘literary’ influence in the conventional sense, MacSweeney’s poetry from *Ranter* onwards began – as a result of his newly specific urban direction – to exhibit a greater awareness of its perceptual and stylistic indebtedness to his journalism, a perception that to some extent had always been present in his work: ‘Reporting gave me sense of what words could be [...] no frills’.¹²⁰ Despite his distaste for an occupation he saw as delivering only: ‘lacquered voyeurism waiting / for us on the deceitful news-stand’,¹²¹ MacSweeney nonetheless recognised its pedigree, and in his eagerness to identify poetic parallels for his own life selected as progenitors several journalist-poets including Chatterton whose ‘Political

¹¹⁸ ‘My Former Darling Country Wrong or Wrong’, *Postcards*.

¹¹⁹ Johnston, *The Poet and the City*, p. 108.

¹²⁰ ‘The autobiography of Barry MacSweeney’, *The Boy*.

¹²¹ ‘Red Ponder’, *Joint Effort*, p. 33. Also apparent in ‘terrible tabloidations’ (‘Sweet Jesus: Pearl’s Prayer’; *Demons*, p. 12) and ‘these aren’t / warts this is a newspaper’ (*Brother Wolf*, [29]).

hack-work provided an admirable outlet for his ‘rage against the world’,¹²² Pasolini (who is honoured in the *Demons* poem ‘Pasolini Demon Memo’) and of course Charles Baudelaire. MacSweeney’s aversion for reporting neither precluded his being ‘a natural’ at it, nor from it engendering in him a mindset that affected not only the manner in which he wrote, but the subjects he wrote about.¹²³ Yet it was following his damning exploitation of tabloid-headlines in *Jury Vet* that he began to make considered use of media formats in his representations of Newcastle. His manuscript notes for the composition of ‘Geordieus’ contain an instruction to write ‘some speeches in tight lines – interspersed with prose action/cut ups/news bulletins/court evidence. Read about Newcastle fire’. Whilst in ‘Cavalry at Calvary’ – shocking in its structural placement as a rare flash of urban, pop-culture, global issue reference amidst the narrowly thematic *Pearl* – MacSweeney addresses the North East’s insularity by highlighting the schism between international happenings and their sensitive, but ultimately disconnected provincial reportage: ‘foaming at the mouth / for the worldwide page of the *Shields Gazette*’. Yet even as he emphasises the contorting nature of newspaper and televisual formats: ‘four columns, 12 cems deep, final edition [...] under the nostrils of the TV cameras, freak show / brilliance’, he posits as an antidote to such sensationalism, the redemptive virtues of human compassion, articulated in a specifically localised register, which also retains a sense of being genuinely his own: ‘Irma, page one if there’s nowt better, pet, / for this edition only’.¹²⁴

MacSweeney’s enormously allusive compositional style is reminiscent both of Cole Swensen’s correlation in his article ‘Poetry City’ between the incongruently juxtaposed and diverse structural elements of a metropolis, a newspaper, ‘the quintessential urban organ’ and poetry itself where ‘images [are] right next to abstractions or declarations’ and ‘sense [...]

¹²² Linda Kelly, *The Marvellous Boy*, p. 29.

¹²³ ‘what really impressed was his journalistic ability - he was a natural’, Kie Miskelly; ‘Barry MacSweeney’, <http://neukol.org.uk/tyneblog/index.php/alltyneblogs?disp=comments> [accessed 10 January 2006]

¹²⁴ *Demons*, p. 23.

doesn't match its sound',¹²⁵ and Walter Benjamin's similar assertion of how the principles of journalistic information ('freshness of the news, brevity [...] above all, lack of connection between the individual news items') reflect man's inability 'to assimilate the data of the world around him'.¹²⁶ For one of the most significant features of MacSweeney's urban-poetic is his ability to fragment a recorded scene and fuse its elements with apparently unconnected detail. In 'Dead Man's Handle' he switches from 'broken jigsaws' and 'Paddy's Market' to 'the halls of hell' and 'Warwickshire', whilst simultaneously ensuring that the reader is aware of media machinations by bringing these explicitly to the fore.¹²⁷ In 'Himself Bright Starre Northern Within' the poet's protagonist is a road accident fatality who, but for her death would have been unknown to him, the details of her life never collated in the manner which occurs in the piece:

A1 crash victim Catherine through Land Rover windscreen

[...]

wrapped in steel & glass after Wagner concert

delete her roadside brains long camelhair coat

[...]

rinsed in Northern rain,¹²⁸

¹²⁵ 'Poetry City', 26 October 2004, http://www.identitytheory.com/nonfiction/swensen_poetry.php [accessed 28 April 2005]: 'in a city, we find a church right next to an apartment building right next to a newspaper office. The newspaper itself, the quintessential urban organ, replicates this juxtaposition in miniature: the story of a political coup right next to an ad for diamond necklaces and a theater review. These things have no connection other than their proximity, and their proximity always demands a mental leap, always serves to put each element out of a context that might naturalize it, making it stand out more vividly. And poetry, too, of course, thrives on juxtaposition on many levels—incongruent images, images right next to abstractions or declarations, sense that doesn't match its sound, and so forth. It's the leaps in contrast to moments of flow that allow for the sonic dynamics of poetry and make those dynamics one of its most important aspects'. An excellent example of this in MacSweeney's work can be found in the poem 'What you have seen today in the afternoon': 'So much besides polyrhythmic decay / in Gateshead! Rusty / bands pineal clatter / if yawn is all there is / when you're alive / in graphite dust, die? My / child / will thrive / on crusts, pioneer son of the evening' (Archive: BM: 1/4/4).

¹²⁶ 'On Some Motifs in Baudelaire', *Illuminations* (London: Fontana Press, 1992), p. 155.

¹²⁷ *Demons*; pp. 74-5. 'Paddy's Market': although common northern terminology for a second-hand goods bazaar, this was also the well-known name for a used clothes market held at the Milk Market, Quayside, Newcastle on a Saturday morning from the nineteenth century up to the 1970s.

¹²⁸ *Demons*, p. 78.

Similarly, in ‘I Looked Down on a Child Today’, the minutiae of another newsworthy tragedy are recorded from both a clinically accurate journalistic angle (‘between the kerbstone and the wheel’, ‘the steps of a 39 bus’, ‘Gallowgate, the bus was turning left / the child stepped out’, ‘it was the eve of St. Valentine’s Day’), and a redemptively poetic point of view: ‘stepped into the path of something she or he would never know forever [...] whatever / your name you would see / heaven and it would shine and be filled with pianos’.¹²⁹

In ‘Their Hearts Should Be Telling Them’, MacSweeney also employs dense media imagery to acknowledge the role of the national press in defining external perceptions of his city:

puked up last night
 in the Bigg Market, in The Grainger Street West. Fuck you
 snaps in like a polaroid migraine
 [...]
 In the classy newspaper photographs, where the sky
 is darkened by shifting hands
 the pit head flywheel will never whirr again.¹³⁰

This pointed construction signals his frustration with the narrowness of such concepts and prompted the start of an – almost unconscious – move to expand them. That he had struggled in the past with Newcastle as an imagistic albatross is clear from his sense of ‘being too involved’, and in his frequent retreats to the more malleable and less preconception heavy Sparty Lea. Yet as MacSweeney’s literary capability matured, so did his capacity to interact with the city, and whilst its embodiment in *Demons* is still occluded by more pressing

¹²⁹ *Wolf Tongue*, p. 314. The specificity of the locational and event detail in this poem is offset by MacSweeney’s refusal to classify the sex of the child (‘he or she’) allowing his representation of a particular event to take on far greater significance relating to infant mortality, his own childlessness and the continual co-existence of life/activity and death within the urban environment.

¹³⁰ Archive: BM: 1/17/1.

concerns ('Forgive me the black city which burns in my heart [...] the blazing jetblack cathedral of my broken heart'),¹³¹ *Horses* revealed him finally at ease with his urban locale and pursuing a personal vision of the metropolis which is self-confident enough to assert itself in sardonic refutation of stereotypes: 'some of us are almost literate'.¹³² The celebratory portraits of Newcastle which exist in *Horses* were realised through MacSweeney's discovery of a parallel for his relationship with the city in Apollinaire's reactions to Paris, and as Paul Batchelor asserts in 'Morphic Cubism' it was precisely this close identification which allowed him to 'move freely between Newcastle in the late 1990s and the trenches of the First World War' and achieve such 'wildly variant effects'.¹³³ Having begun his career attempting – and only partially succeeding – to approach the city in the mode of his adolescent heroes,¹³⁴ this final 'collaboration' with a poet discovered late in his literary life (his serious interest in Apollinaire arose 'after a visit to Paris in May 1997'),¹³⁵ resulted in a collection of immense fluidity which was also geographically distinct, as the poet lovingly exploited the imagistic juxtaposition of the two cities to create Newcastle as a warm and highly personalised location: 'I couldn't see you today at [...] the Haymarket / But you were at one of the Metro stations',¹³⁶

MacSweeney's Apollinaire 'collaborations' are resplendent with a maturely gained confidence in his ability to assimilate known texts into his work without diminishing them or jeopardising his idiosyncratic lyric voice, and there are lines in *Horses* which even self-consciously parody their literary precedents: Wordsworth's 'at late hours / Of winter evenings

¹³¹ 'Dead Man's Handle', *Demons*, p. 74. Although a recognisably more 'urban' sequence than *Pearl*, it is the soberly recalled Durham and not the nightmarishly malformed Newcastle that is the stronger locative presence in *Demons*.

¹³² 'The Illegal 2CV', *Horses*, p. 42. An approach which is in the author's opinion, characteristic of the work of the best modern Newcastle observers, including Julia Darling and Sean O'Brien.

¹³³ 'Morphic Cubism'.

¹³⁴ Batchelor notes that 'To Lynn at Work whose Surname I don't know', the opening poem from MacSweeney's first collection, *The Boy* [is] a poem notably influenced by the French poets MacSweeney was reading at the time', *ibid.*

¹³⁵ Back cover, *Horses*.

¹³⁶ 'Horses, or The Fenwick's Third Floor Hair-do', *Horses*, p. 39. In his final collection MacSweeney takes inspiration from a later French poet to those who motivated his juvenile compositions and, alongside allusions to O'Hara (also paralleled in his early work) creates in *Horses* his most tangible and accessible (though far more stylistically competent) evocation of Newcastle since *The Boy*.

[...] The feeble salutation from the voice / Of some unhappy woman, now and then / Heard as we pass' becomes MacSweeney's: 'A woman bleats & cries in the night / She has lost her bloke'.¹³⁷ Yet this poise, this capacity to manage his sources, had been gradually accruing in the poet's work, as indicated by his self-representation in *Demons* as 'night crawling homme man', 'Nightjar Sweeno'.¹³⁸ which deliberately evokes customary poetic associations between darkness, vice, death and despair that serve to heighten his urban agony as a Blakean victim for whom 'the midnight streets of the city are, inevitably, the only appropriate setting for [...] misery'.¹³⁹ This persona recalls Baudelaire's 'Le Crépuscule du soir', in which evening time is "'ami du criminel'" and night 'breeds not only wild beasts but malignant demons'.¹⁴⁰ And 'Le Crépuscule' is also evoked by the poet in the 1970s lyric 'Ode Stem Hair' with regards to the mass cultural consumerism envisaged by T. Dan Smith that has since become 21st century reality: 'Crepuscular phantoms [...] Suds of jazz inebriate the mountain, / manners go. Fat city'.¹⁴¹ In a later, *Pearl* related poem, the shifting nature of the poet's city is evident in its representation as an alluring yet unattainable Mecca of cultural refinement, with Pearl's request: 'Take me to the bookshops, you said Thorne's, Percy Street, next to what they call a university [...] take me to the bookshops and an art gallery',¹⁴² a notion prefigured by the remarkable Whitman-esque celebration of it in the manuscript poem 'But this is Newcastle':

riches strew'd

¹³⁷ William Wordsworth, 'Book VII', in *The Prelude*, ed. Ernest De Selincourt, updated by Stephen Gill (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1970), p. 122. MacSweeney, 'Terrible Changes', *Horses*, p. 23. Johnston notes that in Wordsworth's poem this figure represents 'the individual city dweller [...] whose particular voice suggests not only the weariness associated with the never-ending round of human "business" but also the debilitating loneliness that characterizes life in what De Quincey called "the mighty labyrinths of London"' (*The Poet and the City*, p. 96).

¹³⁸ 'Sweeno, Sweeno', *Demons*, p. 88.

¹³⁹ Johnston, *The Poet and the City*, pp. 125-142.

¹⁴⁰ Ibid. Other examples of MacSweeney's night portraits include 'distressing dew at dawn', 'here in the death-enclosing / night / No more for me the rising of a pink punk sun. Black's / the colourway for Sweeno the Uncleano this very very day', 'down in the dead of night when others have gone home', 'down his neck of night purrings', 'Down the tunnel into nightlight. Endgame' ('Sweeno, Sweeno', *Demons*, pp. 88-93). In 'Don't Leave Me' the demons have 'midnight overcoats' and 'There is nothing between us now but the four o'clock starres. / O / they are making up a tattered sky as I walk the night and elsewhere / you sleep' (*Wolf Tongue*, p. 297) and 'swinging through the night' ('Miss The Mississippi and Thee', *Horses*, p. 15).

¹⁴¹ *Odes 1971-1978*, p. 29.

¹⁴² 'Pearl's New Dawn and Silverdew', Archive; BM 1/19/2.

even in the streets: whose towers
 kiss the clouds
 they are so high’.

Here, he presents an idealised vision which is rescued from irony by the earnestness and self-implication with which the metaphor is delivered (‘we’, ‘our’),¹⁴³ and which, in its relative contemporariness with *Pearl*, evokes the ‘city of great renown’ of that sequence’s alliterative prototype with its ‘streets of gold as glass all clear, / The walls of jasper that gleamed like glair’.¹⁴⁴

The literary stance MacSweeney adopts towards his native city in *Horses* and other poems written circa 1998-9 is not so distant from that he evinced at the outset of his career. In the archive poem ‘Freak Wizard No-One’ his Gallic *maudits* remain: ‘like Paul Verlaine your heart cries like a city pouring with rain’ alongside newer inspirations: ‘Jimmy Reed’, ‘Stockhausen’ and the Bible.¹⁴⁵ His attitude towards established forms is still direct: ‘it is an elegy now a complete thing of the past / This song of the thrown-over hero who walked into your halls of hell’¹⁴⁶ and he continues to use perceptually challenging models, both literary and artistic: ‘The Vows’ is dedicated to Picasso and constructed around vibrant symbolist images: ‘Watching the poppies in the passing gardens fan out like flames / And the blue roses of the flashed-out fuse explode / In the allotments of my memory’.¹⁴⁷ Yet what had changed in *Horses* was MacSweeney’s ability to cohere his influences, so that instead of his cityscapes being distracted and fragmented by them, their treatment in his work became an index of his

¹⁴³ ‘But this is Newcastle’, Archive; BM 1/17/1.

¹⁴⁴ J.R.R. Tolkien, ‘Pearl’, pp. 121-122.

¹⁴⁵ ‘Freak Wizard No-One’, Archive: BM: 2/10/3. As was usual with MacSweeney, these references were far from random. Jimmy Reed was an electric blues musician and alcoholic who died a few days short of his 51st birthday. Whilst MacSweeney’s statement in ‘Rue Christine Lundi’: ‘Stockhausen says Ignore the known world / I agree’ (*Horses*, p. 75) was partly an anarchic call to reject previous artistic forms but had added resonance in being a symbolic refutation of Bunting who had championed Schoenberg’s compositional techniques which Stockhausen made his name overturning.

¹⁴⁶ ‘I Love You But No’, *Horses*, p. 58.

¹⁴⁷ *Horses*, p. 70.

maturation and the realisation of his own lyric voice: ‘Situating at Grey’s Monument between Northumberland Street and the children of the next universe / as in verse’.¹⁴⁸

This composure is manifest in MacSweeney’s self-assertively unfettered avowals of legacy, both uttered: ‘we are modernists, after all [...] and I’ll name them if you want me to because I’m proud / of every single one’,¹⁴⁹ and formally realised: ‘forgive out gaz / On the other hand, don’t. We are modernists / I am spit on the pavement’.¹⁵⁰ His concurrent leanings towards ‘Investigative Poetry’ denoted MacSweeney’s continuing structural and linguistic ambitions: ‘if we work tough enough / the language will be kept alive / And the mutants & enemies will be driven down’,¹⁵¹ and the rebellious timbre of Ed Sanders’ manifesto resonates through the central themes of the collection, inciting opposition to the sanctioned and received at every turn. In *Horses*, the fighting in the trenches becomes the struggle of the Modernists against the Movement; the centre against the margin; of Newcastle as a complex and wonderful city ‘which matches Paris’ against traditional stereotypes.¹⁵² Through the use of such elaborate literary allusion, MacSweeney declares the freedom of his poetic: both in the novel manner of his ‘collaboration’ with Apollinaire, and in the individual manner of his mature approach to the city itself: ‘The Metro smells like a ghost and I want to introduce you to it / The Metro is like musick from Stockhausen it rocks until one in the morning.’¹⁵³

¹⁴⁸ ‘Feast of Fashion Burning Down Zone’, *Horses*, p. 19.

¹⁴⁹ ‘Mary Bell Sonnets’ [97], Archive: BM: 2/9/1.

¹⁵⁰ ‘Feast of Fashion Burning Down Zone’, *Horses*, p. 17.

¹⁵¹ ‘Victory Over Darkness & The Sunne’, *Horses*, p. 28. The mainstays of ‘Investigative Poetry’ as Ed Sanders conceived it, were freedom from artistic persecution, writing one’s mind in any chosen form and not grovelling to those in power to procure money and fame or to avoid being ostracized. All of which notions are echoed in *Horses*. ‘Investigative Poetry: The Content of History will be Poetry’ (1975), in *Talking Poetics From Naropa Institute: Annals of the Jack Kerouac School of Disembodied Poetics: Volume Two*, ed. by Anne Waldman and Marilyn Webb (Shambhala Publications, 1978), <http://www.poetspath.com/transmissions/messages/sanders.html> [accessed 23 September 2007]

¹⁵² MacSweeney, ‘Foreword’ to *The Last Bus*, p. 7.

¹⁵³ ‘I Love You But No’, *Horses*, p. 60.

It is the joyfully unencumbered nature, the real sense of ‘flinging language out beyond the self’ in *Horses* that renders MacSweeney’s Newcastle within it so refreshing,¹⁵⁴ as its form is approached through the strict (if diverse) textual forms of Apollinaire’s *Calligrammes* (and other works) and yet emerges in a sprawling, tangential manner which, like the Ginsberg-esque geographical narratives of *Demons*, glories in its juxtapositions and jovially assimilates more artistic precedents than inhabit even his first collection: ‘I am the Pooka I will dance in the Club a Gogo listening to Muddy Waters / I will stride across the Erith Marshes like Magwitch in the darke.’¹⁵⁵ In a statement which explicates the density of MacSweeney’s later work, Bill Griffiths has said: ‘It might sound like an older poet’s writing is more erudite or academic, but it’s simply a matter of having collected so much material, you can’t help depending on it to some extent’ and MacSweeney often seems to use it all.¹⁵⁶ Yet while some of his artistic stimuli emerge and dissipate in his work at the behest of current obsessions and (anti)literary trends (Nicholas Johnson notes how he was ‘open to the youthful aspect of running with whatever looked interesting at the time’),¹⁵⁷ many endure as influences from the time of his conception of their significance until that of his own death. That he continued to develop his self-created literary legacy and add to his progenitors ensured that his depictions of Newcastle remained both innovative and yet consistent, propelled by his successive manias but also by three central philosophies: the Romantic, the regional and the Symbolist, each of which are provocatively epitomised in the only three commemorations to subsist in both his first and last collections: ‘byron’, ‘Basil’ and ‘Verlaine’.

¹⁵⁴ *Poetry Information*, p. 30.

¹⁵⁵ ‘I Love You But No’, *Horses*, p. 60.

¹⁵⁶ Paul Batchelor, ‘An Outsider Still: an Interview with Bill Griffiths’.

¹⁵⁷ ‘Barry MacSweeney: An Appreciation’.

Chapter Five: From Paris to ‘Demon Town’ and Back Again: The Changing Phases of Barry MacSweeney’s Newcastle.

An essentially incongruous correlation exists within Barry MacSweeney’s published oeuvre between the enduring impression of Newcastle derived from reading many of his poems, and the relatively few specifically designated city locations they contain. Outside of his first and last collections, *The Boy and Horses*, there exists a large quantity of verse which contains scant reference to the city’s particular landmarks, where (as with Whitman’s writing) ‘only a handful of short poems [...] are based exclusively upon city experience: in other short poems and in the longer ones, references [...] are usually scattered and fragmentary’ and yet a sense of metropolitan specificity often prevails.¹ This apparent discrepancy may be partly explained by the array of other denotative paraphernalia which MacSweeney uses to inscribe particular place in his work: from local characters and etymology to cultural allusion (‘worse than Paddy’s Market’),² and by the reader’s cognitive awareness of the poet’s locative origin which he himself implicitly maintains: ‘*Let’s hear it for the fratchy fractured Geordie*’.³ Yet Newcastle’s causal presence in MacSweeney’s verse is further corroborated by the discovery of many more overt references to the city in the draft, manuscript and unpublished papers that have been made available since the poet’s death in 2000. A vast wealth of material which provides additional insights into the psychological omnipresence of the city as a source of reference for the poet and reveals its existence as a progressive and evolving concern, manifest in lines such as: ‘on the dole in the 20s / and 30s in Newcastle, / we then prospered in shipyard / and factory’.⁴ Most crucially, however, this resource allows us to explore the dynamic between these two interconnected and yet distinct corpuses, and to use the poet’s

¹ Johnston, *The Poet and the City*, pp. 106-7.

² ‘Dead Man’s Handle’, *Demons*, p. 75.

³ ‘Strap Down in Snowville’, *Demons*, p. 86.

⁴ ‘William Gordon Calvert’, Archive: BM: 2/3.

archive compositions to reflect upon the enduring significance and changing nature of Newcastle within his published work.

In order to undertake such a comparative assessment it is first necessary to establish the different patterns of reference to the city that exist within each body of work. Within MacSweeney's published poems, Newcastle can appear a discontinuous concern, one that sequentially emerges in at least four key thematic guises that interact and overlap, but which at points disappears altogether from his verse. The first of these renderings, most apparent in *The Boy* but henceforth implicit, evokes the nostalgic topography of his youthful experience ('The city was a fairground where we hid') centralising images of the River Tyne, its adjacent architecture, its iconic bridges and the city's Victorian railway station.⁵ The second version tackles disintegrating North East industry, addresses socio-economic realities, uses regional-historical data and is exemplified in 1977's *Black Torch*. Following this, and as such specific iconography became unsuitable for a poet seeking to test the boundaries of his genre, named Newcastle locations largely vanished from his verse. Until, several years later in the sinuous *Ranter* (1985) and more perceptibly in *Memos* (1993), the city emerged for a third time as a far darker entity. Its focus having relocated to a differently resonant location: 'red and deep blood running at the Gallowgate crossroads [...] beneath the blue star / under the black and white roar, the maniac milk' which signalled a transition from faded industrial grandeur to alcohol, football and brutality that was rendered starker by the lack of intervening address.⁶ Yet whilst such desolate, nihilistic landscapes of urban misrule persist in both the *Memos* ('unconscious in Hood Street')⁷ and *Postcards* (1998), and Newcastle's presence in *Demons* is often occluded by private concerns ('here in my closet kingdom on the rim of mad Noel'),⁸ MacSweeney's posthumous publication signalled a renaissance for his poetic Newcastle by

⁵ 'THANK YOU ROSEMARY FOR THE LOAN OF THE ATTIC', *Viareggio*. This poem also contains the line: 'and at noon at Central Station'.

⁶ 'Silent is the house: all are laid asleep', *Memos*, p. 21.

⁷ 'Linda Manning is a Whore', *Memos*, p. 15.

⁸ 'Strap Down in Snowville', *Demons*, p. 87.

ushering in a fourth stage in its development. Recreating his city in *Horses* as the counterpart to Apollinaire's beloved Paris, the poet embraced its idiosyncrasies to deliver a vigorous, wryly good-humoured and distinctly subjective appraisal of its character: 'O howay honey [...] We'll stagger down Dean Street / and celebrate our great victory of love over darkness'.⁹

Newcastle's portrayal in MacSweeney's draft and unpublished work primarily mirrors the thematic progressions of his published oeuvre, and yet its consideration is more consistent and more explicit. In early papers his descriptions of the city confidently extend the romantic visions of *The Boy* whilst concurrently denoting a greater depth of sensation in his responses to Newcastle, as in 'Black Spur' [2], which elegantly proceeds:

What you have seen today in the afternoon
is an evening of objects graced
by morning when light hits Newcastle
& the village swarms¹⁰

In much of his other archived work, from 'Mizzle Through Slats' to the 'Mary Bell Sonnets', Newcastle also emerges as a potent entity, fashioned with dense description, linear narrative, specific foci and more political thrust than it exhibits in many of his widely available poems: 'Seaton Sluice navvies chipped hand-bones / In Tynemouth december dawn / on bitter Quayside / livid boxes'.¹¹ Yet what is conspicuous here is that whilst such detail inevitably manifests in lyrics pertaining to his published depictions of Newcastle, local allusions occur in his manuscripts even in draft material from the mid-point of his career when, as Marianne Morris avows, he was at his most wantonly impermeable, writing with a 'vocabulary designed more to agitate than promulgate' and insisting on 'the obsolescence of traditional modes of

⁹ 'Terrible changes', *Horses*, p. 23.

¹⁰ Archive: BM: 2/2.

¹¹ Archive: BM: 1/4/4. Version #2 of an untitled poem beginning: 'speak for none'. Although the designations here refer to places outside the city, the capitalisation of 'Quayside' links the region's industry with its 'capital' Newcastle.

interpretation'.¹² The omnipresence of the city in MacSweeney's papers is thus epitomised by its existence in drafts of the *Jury Vet* poems – a sequence notable for its dearth of North East reference – which are annotated with an intimation of his hatred for its affluent contingent: 'Ponteland punters in new Cortinas, fucktrash, bumming, children's pony riding lessons' and further considered in a pencilled appendage to 'Wild Returns: Gale Hits Jury Vet Probe':¹³

Quaysides and chains

Women by water. Banners

& men

In & Out of Work

People in queues, waiting for nothing¹⁴

Newcastle's psychological propinquity for the poet is further apparent in the often arbitrary nature of his allusions, as when he abruptly asserts in a London-centric poem contemplating his childlessness: 'I WANT TO GO TO HEATON PARK'.¹⁵

The existence of such discrepancies between MacSweeney's manuscript and published work inevitably affects any consideration of his poetic Newcastle. For whilst the wealth of locative detail extant in his papers evinces an inveterate concern with the city, the consistency of such exacerbates the gaps where Newcastle disappears from his collections, and the study of early drafts reveals his propensity to temper the city in later versions. Such obfuscation can be linked to MacSweeney's stylistic development. The scattered allusions to Newcastle in his early verse from *Boulevard* to *Odes: 1971-1978*, and his tendency in *The Boy* to offset urban-specifics like 'High Level Bridge'¹⁶ with purposely ambiguous topographical reference where

¹² Marianne Morris, 'The Abused Become the Abusers'. Morris writes here with specific relation to 'Just 22 and I Don't Mind Dying'.

¹³ 'People on Trial (Fail the Jury Vet)', [version II], Archive BM 1/10/1.

¹⁴ Archive: BM: 1/10/1.

¹⁵ 'Tangle Free Listening', Archive: BM 1/19/3.

¹⁶ 'To Lyn at Work', *The Boy*, p. 2

events occur not in a named environment but in ‘this town’,¹⁷ ‘round the corner’¹⁸ in ‘the city’,¹⁹ ‘on the frozen bypass’ were due in part to adolescent insecurity.²⁰ The persistence of urban-generics in his mid-point work; the elisions in his drafts: ‘they called you Cinderella (of the towns) / miners and poets’,²¹ and his amendment of ‘Newcastle, infamous poetry’ to read ‘infamous Monkchester poetry’ in consecutive versions of one archive piece,²² all betray his concern with exuding an inscrutable reserve and deflecting anti-provincial criticism of his work.²³ In later poems, a mature self-confidence in his urban subject matter and a return to a more narrative style facilitated Newcastle’s re-emergence in his publications, culminating in the tangible cityscapes of *Horses*. Yet whilst the city’s presence in MacSweeney’s published verse clearly fluctuates and many of his manuscripts were never intended for publication, both bodies of work are equally crucial to understanding the development of his creative responses to the city. His disseminated collections because they embody the conflicting impulses which sporadically occluded his portrayals of the city and his manuscripts in providing a framework for connecting his published visions and revealing the existence of an organic and career-long progression in his literary responses to Newcastle. Only the availability of the archive makes it possible to consider a study of this type, and in the following exploration of MacSweeney’s city, I will view this material in its rightful thematic contexts alongside his published work.

¹⁷ ‘One Year Old, The Wilted Hybrid’, *The Boy*, p. 30.

¹⁸ ‘A Letter, This Far Away, Tonight For Liberty’ [I], *The Boy*, p. 28.

¹⁹ ‘Panther Freckles’, *Odes 1971-78*, p. 30.

²⁰ ‘Himself Bright Starre Northern Within’, *Demons*, p. 80. Peter Barry ascribes this tendency in Larkin’s work to a desire to ‘make the poems “urban-generic” rather than “urban-specific” so as to give ‘locations that quality of generalisability’, something which MacSweeney often uses in his early work to blend together his diverse locations (‘Introduction’ in *Contemporary British Poetry and the City*, p. 6).

²¹ ‘Mizzle Through Slats’, Archive: BM: 2/2.

²² Archive; BM 1/4/4. The poem opens ‘speak for none’. Changing the familiar ‘Newcastle’ to the city’s pre-Norman Conquest name both historicises and obscures his location.

²³ Hence the ranging internationalism and London cityscapes of *The Boy*: ‘the web about St. Paul’s/its scaffold crown’ (‘The Track, Fervour’, *The Boy*, p. 26).

History and Nostalgia: The Evocation of a Past City?

Matthew Jarvis' article 'Presenting the Past: Barry MacSweeney's Cultural Memory' (2002) is largely unconcerned with MacSweeney's depictions of Newcastle, yet his analysis of the poet's cultural historicism forms a useful paradigm for assessing the concurrently thematic and chronological development of his literary city. Reviewing *Memos* and *Pearl*, Jarvis notes each sequence's 'determined rootedness in the cultural moment of its own production' (p. 147), explaining how MacSweeney's 'contemporary references' perform as '*deixis*' with 'the "ability to point", to locate "entities in space, time and social context"' (p. 148). Jarvis also uses Crook, Pakulski and Waters' notion that in the postmodern world the 'historical' is 'a vast collection of available data' to be accessed at will (p. 151), enabling MacSweeney's poetry to become a realm 'in which numerous temporal moments are active at any one time' (p. 152).²⁴ MacSweeney's delineations of Newcastle, composed over thirty-five years, draw similar *deixis* from each witnessed era. Epoch-specific images of shipyards, 'Eric Burden', and 'Bigg Market pizza' which are most germane when first employed, but whose 'rootedness in the cultural moment' of their production allows them to be subsequently invoked to recall their originating era and juxtapose it with the current age. This process occurs in the archive poem 'Pearl's Puck Wonder – Ode' where MacSweeney conjures his 1960s city in a Sparty-based poem from the late 1990s with: 'you with your first Goldsmiths watch. / How elegant you looked in first courts on the way to an Animals concert'.²⁵ Jarvis' principles of historical reinterpretation, framing and 'dynamically applied cultural memory' (p. 156) evoke the poet's mobilisation of centuries of local historical detail, such as his use in 'Map, wall to wall' of 'chiuls of Schleswig' signifying the boats which carried Anglo-Saxons to the English North East and the 'keels' of the Keelmen of Sandgate, a group synonymous with the city's history. These are the devices which enabled MacSweeney to simultaneously consider his experience

²⁴ Jarvis refers here to Stephen Crook, Jan Pakulski & Malcolm Waters *Postmodernization: Change in Advanced Society* (London: Sage, 1992)

²⁵ 'Pearl's Puck Wonder – Ode', Archive: BM: 2/7.

of the city alongside its broader nature and synthesise a vast gamut of detail to sequentially locate the city ‘in space, time and social context’, as in the *Viareggio* poem ‘VANGUARD’:

slamming the door the car

flashed up percy

street. I am

breathless

against

Barclays bank,

holding a typewriter

case.²⁶

The successful manipulation of such a wealth of historical data is far from simple, although for MacSweeney an instinctive fascination with the city’s past and an ensuing desire to accrue a familiarity with its documented forms – or his ‘archival attitude’ (Jarvis, p. 154) – was engendered at an early age and became a driving concern in his portrayals of Newcastle. The poet’s library, now housed at the University of Newcastle upon Tyne, contains more than ten literary and photographic records of the city, at least one of which (*Charleton’s History of Newcastle upon Tyne*) he had owned since childhood and is replete with his annotations, a mention of Bunting and some early handwritten drafts. MacSweeney’s marginal notes to this text also identify it as the source of many of the references he included in his self-proclaimed seminal ‘Map’ series where his burgeoning attempts to utilise historical data in his appraisals of the city can be observed in lines such as:

Pons Elii (pseudonym)

[...]

1649

Chorographia illuminates

²⁶ ‘VANGUARD’, *Viareggio*.

‘OCELLUS,

eye of the north,

[...]

thus, the antiquary speaks,²⁷

Itinerary says:

‘The strength & magnificence

of the waullinge o this toon

far passeth all the waulles

of the cities of Englande,

[...]

Fortiter Defendit Triumphans

badge to wall

city to badge

bond enough

to wrench machine.²⁸

Regrettably, whilst the validating objective of using such text is clear, the poet’s treatment of the material at this early stage is not. Where his own voice intercedes in these final lines he seems to infer the resoluteness of Newcastle and thus his pride in its vigour or, if ‘machine’ is taken as centralised rule, then as declaring the city’s autonomy. Yet by placing this assertion immediately after a citation of the motto earned as a result of the city’s support for Charles I against Cromwellian rebels, the poet obfuscates his intent, and in deferring articulation to his sources and restricting his authorial input, renders the poems rather stilted. This artificiality

²⁷ ‘Map, etcetera’, *Boulevard*, p. 25.

²⁸ ‘Map, wall to wall’, *Boulevard*, pp. 28-9. MacSweeney’s copy of *Charleton’s History of Newcastle upon Tyne* (R.J. Charleton, Harold Hill & Son Ltd, Newcastle, 1950) is inscribed ‘Barry MacSweeney, 35, The Drive, Denton Burn’ with the ‘Barry’ later crossed out and ‘Paul’ (the poet’s brother) put in its place. In it he has underlined the quotation which he includes in full in ‘Map etcetera’ which begins ‘Boot lunnon’ and this text seems likely to be an early source of MacSweeney’s encounter with local literary history.

suggests MacSweeney's insecurity with his sources, a trait emphasised by comparing his lines with Tony Harrison's politically laden treatment of the same maxim in 'Newcastle is Peru':

For defending in our Civil Wars
the King's against the better cause,
Newcastle got its motto: FORTIT-
ER TRIUMPHANS DEFENDIT.²⁹

That no subsequent use of documentary material appears in such untempered form in MacSweeney's work suggests that he rapidly mastered both the handling of such sources and more effective ways to imbue Newcastle with a fitting sense of its historical longevity. One such technique, particularly evident in his earliest and last collections, is his cannily judged designation of the city's ancient, iconic, mercantile districts and architecture. His sporadic, often ephemeral allusions to these comprise a far more expedient model for inscribing the conurbation's history, whilst avoiding the more predictable or repetitive overuse of the motif: 'Central Station [...] I stood on the / bridge parapet, / waved once'.³⁰ Such structural keys, from the early 'Sandgate',³¹ 'Dog Leap Stairs',³² and 'CLOTH MARKET CAFÉ',³³ to the later 'Groat Market',³⁴ 'Blackfriars',³⁵ and 'the organs / of St. Nicholas and St, Mary in the hearte of the city',³⁶ obtain their impact directly from the splendidly suggestive names of parts of the old settlement.³⁷ Whilst in *Horses*, the line 'beautiful stone-cutting in Dean Street and Grainger / Street' evokes Newcastle's individuality and visual elegance through the Classical

²⁹ 'Newcastle is Peru', *Selected Poems*, p. 63.

³⁰ 'THANK YOU ROSEMARY FOR THE LOAN OF THE ATTIC', *Viareggio*.

³¹ 'To Lyn at Work', *The Boy*, p. 2.

³² 'Song', *The Boy*, p. 38.

³³ 'After Breakfast (with Peter) Costing 5/6d.', *The Boy*, p. 49.

³⁴ 'I Love You But No', *Horses*, p. 57.

³⁵ 'The Illegal 2CV', *Horses*, p. 42.

³⁶ 'Victory Over Darkness & the Sunne', *Horses*.

³⁷ Fleur Adcock also uses this technique for more sinister effect in her 'Street Song': 'Monk Street, Friars Street, Gallowgate / are better avoided when its late' (from *Selected Poems*, Oxford University Press, 1983, cited in *The Firebox: Poetry in Britain and Ireland after 1945*, p. 180).

architecture which distinguishes the city from many other northern industrial towns.³⁸ In *The Boy* MacSweeney's ambiguous urban referencing: 'down from the cathedral / this 10 o'clock sun / warms the market cobbles'³⁹ and the time-span implicit in 'railings and gravestones / water and ashes floated across the cobbled hill' creates not just a sense of Newcastle's age but evokes the city's innate architectural memory.⁴⁰ Thus, the poet touches on the alluring notion proffered by Julia Darling in her 'A Short Manifesto For My City' ('This city [...] knows its interior') that a place's past is incessantly etched into the fabric of its constituent buildings by the events that occur around and within them.⁴¹

The ultimate symbol of Newcastle's longevity is the iconographic River Tyne: a motif so prevalent in the city's lyrical depiction as to be almost inescapable by anyone seeking to address it, and one crucial to Newcastle's identity in being both the reason for its foundation and the sole physical element to bear witness to all eras of its existence. In MacSweeney's poetry, the river (and its destination 'We realised at once that the Tyne was a flowing part of the whole North Sea'), often manifests as a signifier for the location, predominantly with regards to the changes in the waterway's industrial function and its ensuing emblematic status for the evolution of Newcastle itself.⁴² In several compositions, MacSweeney trawls the river theme for symbols of the city's occupational history, many of which embody desolate societal concerns:

credit card blown burned to death in Consett

Tempest Vane Mercantile Dry Dock sometime lately⁴³

In the lead-shot factory

³⁸ 'Victory Over Darkness & The Sunne', *Horses*, p. 27.

³⁹ '10 Green Bottles & Lynn', *The Boy*, p. 3.

⁴⁰ 'On the Burning Down of the Salvation Army Mens Palace, Dogs Bank, Newcastle', *The Boy*, p. 32.

⁴¹ Julia Darling, *Apology for Absence* (Todmorden: Arc Publications, 2004), p. 41.

⁴² 'The Man Who Walks', *Horses*, p. 76.

⁴³ 'These days will be saturated with filth', *Memos*, p. 20.

at Scotswood
 & in Riveter's Yards
 from Wallsend
 to Tyne Dock
 & under riverside Pylons
 I only told the Truth:
 I cannot lose the Grief⁴⁴

Or alternatively castigate the waterway's modern usage: 'Wylam rail bridge so far away now [...] just upstream from the Rocket Angling Club's private fishing banks'.⁴⁵ The poet's River Tyne and his related use of industrial motifs are – like those of his contemporaries Armstrong and Pickard – propelled by a fierce sense of anger and betrayal at the dissolution of the blue-collar industries. This resentment, which is even now incarnate in the city and its adjacent landscape and embedded in the wider North East consciousness is captured in MacSweeney's lines: 'Chaos Extinction Dereliction [...] North eastern industry & love'.⁴⁶ Yet his relatively sparse allusions to the river are also inescapably affectionate, suggesting both the poet's own uneasy sense of his locative identity and his reluctant homage to a crucial signifier in his poetic-geographical heritage, as he uses the feature as a philosophical simile: 'Feel / the city like a river, its / future not written in words',⁴⁷ and renders it with unashamed and familiar warmth: 'sun always goes down like this between the / staithes of the High Level Bridge'.⁴⁸

⁴⁴ 'No Mercy', Archive, BM: 1/17/1. Also: 'naked aborigines of Tyneside / wading for salmon and char / 70 years of the Stanley Delta / owned by Cuthbert [...] Tyneside / iris / of the island / down rivers / to the sea'. (*Black Torch* [29], Archive BM: 1/14/8), and several comments on the demise of the North East fishing industry: 'How soon before / coalfish / haddock / cod / are cold as diamond / in quayside barrels, / before the hull strikes / waves again. / How long before / trawler crews rest their lids, / how long till nostrils are salt clean, / & fingers no longer grapple with nylon'. ('Walk', *The Boy*, p. 10).

⁴⁵ 'Entrance to Heaven', *Horses*, p. 61.

⁴⁶ Version #3 of untitled poem beginning 'speak for none', Archive: BM 1/4/4.

⁴⁷ 'Far Cliff Babylon', *Odes 1971-78*, p. 59. The suggestion that this refers to Newcastle comes from the opening section of the poem where MacSweeney alludes to the 'city of my birth'.

⁴⁸ 'To Lyn at Work Whose Surname I don't know', *The Boy*, p. 2.

MacSweeney's arguably most effective attempt at synthesising the historical North East experience is 1977's *Black Torch*. Taking as its impetus the recent spate of colliery closures, this study entwines a vast sphere of chronological incident with distinct vernacular dialogues juxtaposing dissimilar social perspectives: 'ahh haven't orned more than 3 bob a day / in twenty yor' (p. 16), notes the ethnic diversity embedded in local history ('there have been straight roads through Newcastle / & household gods / Mithras / & the Raven Banner / mix in the blood of children' p. 66) and tackles, amongst many other concerns, modifications in local urban infrastructure and modern political scandal in 'metro stations into the city crust' and 'year Dan Smith and Alderman Cunningham' (p. 39).⁴⁹ Particularly significant, however, is the way in which MacSweeney amalgamates these materials, punctuating his sequence with (by now) judiciously handled historical documentation relating to the city, its mining tradition and the crucial function of its river:

1279

a verdict was returned

the priors of Tynemouth

and Durham

have erected towns on either side

of the Tyne

'where no towns should stand'

to the great injury of the whole borough

[...]

the sentence was

clear and simple: no towns

on the Tyne

save Newcastle.⁵⁰

⁴⁹ The page numbers here are taken from the text of *Black Torch* located in the Archive, BM: 1/14/8.

⁵⁰ *Black Torch*, p. 33. Also: 'Henry III / supplied a charter / to the townsmen / of Newcastle / so they may / dig / for fire / in the wake of Ida / for coal', (p. 26).

Whilst simultaneously conjuring a sense of both literary and ancient military and religious community in allusions to Pickard ('travelled on the dole / sky in Tom and Connie's hair'), Bunting ('southrons / pagan song drives iron / into your plaid money')⁵¹ and other historical Northumbrian icons: 'Halfden', 'Ida', 'Bede', 'Cuthbert'.⁵² The sheer range of information presented in *Black Torch* and the persuasive eloquence of its orchestration provides an impression of a creator sensitively engaged with his topic, aware of the remarkable value of the conurbation's interconnected histories and in possession of an innate understanding which allows him to summon a uniquely tangible illustration of the city at the heart of his sequence:

Grainger Market

hecatombs of fresh killed meat

poachers

dealers in rabbit

[...]

'The people are like coal

in mortar'

Butcher's spittoon'

[...]

Execution Dock

wooden cobble cross

at Gallowgate

to Eldon Square

whose founder

stole from Shelley

then the Moors

Jedburgh Ayrshire and Fife.⁵³

⁵¹ *Black Torch*, p. 13, Archive: BM: 1/14/8.

⁵² *Black Torch*, pp. 13-29.

⁵³ *Black Torch*, p. 54. It is the uncommonly sustained nature and the intensity of *Black Torch* which ensures that the emotive connection between author and subject is more evident here than elsewhere in his work, although many of the elements used in this sequence were employed to similar effect in others. The success of this sequence also renders more tragic MacSweeney's failure to complete the later sections of this project, the third

Another historicist device, which operates sporadically in MacSweeney's work, is the use of images conjuring the working-class culture of 1960s Newcastle and thus the post-war milieu of Chaplin and Common. In the poem '& The Biggest Bridge is Forty Feet Long' such motifs represent an immediate concern in evoking an era adjacent to that of the poem's composition and the cultural landscape of its author's recent youth: 'cobbles, tramlines & winkle packets / budgie eggs in sawdust, shredded tobacco / in a faltering hand', and are here juxtaposed with equally era-specific American terms ('speak-easy', 'alfalfa', 'precincts') to create dissonance and enhance their specificity.⁵⁴ Yet MacSweeney also utilised the nostalgic resonance of such imagery to great effect in his later poems, and examples of such wistful retrospection include the plebeian pub image: 'dominoes laugh in the sun at night / ash drifts down & coats the dogs' (1975-9)⁵⁵ and a recollection of 1960s teenage friendship: 'he would not take off his Mod glasses and would not listen at the Big / Lamp' (1997).⁵⁶ The poet's fervent cravings for traditional Tyneside delicacies perform a similar function in his work: 'All we wanted was pease pudding / and freshly boiled beetroot / fresh from the pan' (1996-7),⁵⁷ 'tonight we shall / have leeks in butter [...] and lentil soup with onions and carrots' (1993-4),⁵⁸ as do his inscriptions of typically north east and – not solely alcoholic – pastimes:

soaking gardens and allotments until the lupin and peony seeds

descend;

of which was intended to be 'based on tape recordings with residents of Sparty Lea and the Allen Valley' (*Poetry Information*, p. 39).

⁵⁴ *The Boy*, p. 31. Although this poem is urban-generic in its use of 'these houses', 'this town', 'this city', the images cited above and the rural (Northumbrian?) references in the first stanza: 'quilts of rain', 'peat', 'wind', 'juniper' are certainly suggestive of place. MacSweeney also ensures that his North East imagery is even further antedated, with 'steamy / nosed children of this city / dazzling dark. it could be 1926 another fantasy', with the presumed intention of evoking the stereotype of Newcastle as being too removed from the rest of the country to be affected by its advances.

⁵⁵ *Blackbird*.

⁵⁶ 'Cornflower', *Horses*, p. 33. Whilst the use of 'Mod glasses' dates the reference to the 1960s and therefore to a time when MacSweeney mostly resided in Newcastle, the location is also inferred from the area of the city around Summerhill Street which is termed 'the Big Lamp' 'because of its association with the site of the first electric street lamp', Doug Ridgeway, 'Hadrian's Cycle Way: Newburn Pumping Station/Big Lamp Brewery and Keelman', http://www.cycle-routes.org/hadrianscycleway/landmarks/big_lamp.html [accessed 13 September 2007]. There is also a brewery, several beers, a garage and a church which originate in this vicinity which are called 'Big Lamp'.

⁵⁷ 'Ode to Redhot Beetroot', Archive: BM: 1/20/1.

⁵⁸ 'Wealth is a Filthy Rag', Archive: BM: 1/18/2.

I want to be bright shining

as cuticles in the Dunton nursery.

Bright as Aidan's eyes

[...]

as hounds paw leek flags and onion beds' [1993]⁵⁹

'I stood in my very own allotment, saying: ITS MINE' [1997].⁶⁰

Although certainly no Keith Armstrong as regards the sentimental overburdening of working-class symbols, MacSweeney's treatment of this problematic motif is commonly redeemed both by its first-hand significance and judicious intermittency.⁶¹ Yet this lingering nostalgia for a specifically working-class male culture does denote his personal concern with an aspect of local identity being gradually eroded by the city's evolution: 'the club, Tom, the full-sized snooker table, where you can write in big chalk and / lay a fat man down'.⁶²

Ripping at the Seams: Industrial & Infrastructural Despoliation.

Themes of longevity, structural durability, of history and foundations are inevitably restricted to what may be termed MacSweeney's more nostalgically sanguine urban poems, for such chronological etching is only possible where architecture and resonant local symbols remain extant. Otherwise the converse applies, and in much of his and other modern North East poetry, the city is exemplified instead by what is altered or missing, by the gaps in its physical structure and in photographs and memories incompatible with the present landscape. In

Contemporary British Poetry and the City, Peter Barry tackles this phenomenon in relation to

⁵⁹ 'Shaking Minds with Robespierre', *Memos*, p. 17

⁶⁰ 'Ploughmen Dig My Earth', Archive: BM: 1/19/3.

⁶¹ One of MacSweeney's fortes was his wariness of hackneyed symbols, and wherever possible he used personal images over generic ones, so that thirty years after *The Boy* he was able to recall 'one of the clearest memories I've got from childhood [...] seeing about 800 cows being driven by men on horses over the hill down to the Tyne yard, down to the abattoir' (*Poetry Information*, p. 27) in the *Zero Hero* poem 'Fuck it, Dearest': 'Blaydon's slaughter house / heifer blood' (Archive: BM: 1/20/1).

⁶² 'John Bunyan to Johnny Rotten', *Demons*, p. 105.

his own experience of Liverpool and his discovery of the ‘urban prosaic’ poetry of Roy Fisher:

The realisation that the cityscape which had seemed so immutable was actually just like stage scenery and could be swept away when finished with did much to stimulate my sense of the city as a place of peculiarly fraught interaction between the personal, the social and the political [...The] scale of change imposed on cities in the 1960s and 1970s went generally unmourned. It was therefore a revelation to come upon the work of Birmingham poet Roy Fisher [...] and find that the kind of contradictory feelings of loss and resentment [...] were articulated in contemporary poetry, not in a dirge-like lament [...] but in an inventive, supple medium of verse which combined the lyrical and the documenting impulse (p. 9).

Although the situation posited here: the poet’s realisation that ‘there is “more sky than there used to be”’⁶³ is not explicitly addressed in MacSweeney’s work – the nearest related instance being ‘They’re bringing down parts of Benwell brick after brick’⁶⁴ – the reverberations of the trauma clearly are. In a poem from *The Boy* he signals decay in ‘down dark / steps in the derelict part of town’⁶⁵ whilst in an untitled piece he states it outright: ‘polyrhythmic decay / in Gateshead! Rusty / bands pineal clatter’.⁶⁶ In *Joint Effort* he proclaims a bitter distrust of urban development, its instigators’ ignorance of what they raze and the misappropriation of public funds, epitomised in a municipal structure which was completed in 1968 at a cost of nearly five million pounds: ‘Bronchitis [...] ripped lungs, / stuck as posts, the blackest tulips / sprout there. / from similar ruptures that new civic hall borrows breath’.⁶⁷ These are concerns which recur in the later *Black Torch* with even more obvious pejorative reference to the despoliation of Newcastle’s familiar structure:

cloak encrusting

⁶³ ‘Introduction’, *Contemporary British Poetry and the City*, p. 9.

⁶⁴ ‘I Love You But No’, *Horses*, p. 57.

⁶⁵ ‘Death go Get Yr Shoes Repaired & Mend Yr Icey Hat’, *The Boy*, p. 50.

⁶⁶ Archive: BM 1/4/4.

⁶⁷ ‘IV’, *Joint Effort*, p. 39. There is no specific mention of Newcastle in this poem but the location is inferred both from the mining imagery that is used and its publication in 1970 being roughly contemporaneous with the completion of the new Newcastle Civic Centre which was opened 1968.

city well-gutted Georgian crescents ripped
 back alleys gouged holes in centre cells
 spaghetti roadway experimental roundabouts' (p. 39).

That MacSweeney was incensed by the infrastructural mismanagement of the city and the alterations to his childhood landscape that occurred during the 1970s is nowhere more evident than in his frequent allusions to T. Dan Smith, a politician who became the ultimate byword for Newcastle's structural despoliation and who appears regularly in MacSweeney's published work, and even more so in his manuscripts from this period. This preoccupation emerges in one of the poet's 1970s 'notes to himself' which reads: 'DAN SMITH: Write to Chronicle & Wakefield paper to see if I can visit cuttings library',⁶⁸ whilst Smith is also derogatorily immortalised in the unpublished political tract 'Geordieus Unbound': 'He eased, crying out again at / Smith, Poulson, Cunningham, and / all of those others who took the / municipal rights of the people'.⁶⁹ MacSweeney's Shelleyean inspired 'Geordieus', rife with societal division and intimations of the nihilism and urban misrule which were to become his topic in *Memos*, remains a defiant portrayal of a city in conflict. Its temperamental affiliation with Pickard's early work, and direct use of details arguably based on both men's encounters with the city's administrators ('They weren't artists, poets, men / of culture – like myself [...] They are dirty working class / yobbos, out for a scrap and a piss-up')⁷⁰ is atypical, and thus appears to constitute an instance in which MacSweeney's specifically directed vitriol caused him to admit a common purpose with his erstwhile rival. Yet the element of – particularly dialectical – parody in his characterisation of Geordieus, quite obviously the 'labourer poet',⁷¹ suggests that this rivalry was not totally inert:

Aam used ti brushing ya lungs

⁶⁸ Archive: BM: 2/2.

⁶⁹ Ibid.

⁷⁰ 'Geordieus Unbound', Archive: BM: 2/2.

⁷¹ Untitled poem, Archive: BM: 1/4/4.

wi words
 that corl
 half shocked at vulgar rhymes
 [...]
 me porse is empty wi poetry'.⁷²

Whilst mirroring the motifs of other contemporary North East verse ('same seams / pitfalls and dole / shipyard sweatshop'),⁷³ MacSweeney even so makes them his own. He uses his antiestablishmentarianism to place his exploited metropolis and its working-class in diametric opposition to the political intrigue of the council and its leader: the 'secret deals / of the inner cadre / in dan smith's castle'.⁷⁴

As the timbre of these extracts suggests, it was less the physical alterations that Dan Smith inflicted on Newcastle as the consequences they held for its populace which sparked MacSweeney's journalistic interest and concerned him as an individual and poet peculiarly affected by social injustice. Andrew Crozier has observed of MacSweeney that: 'More than he detested the destruction of communities witnessed in the last two decades, he loathed its impact on individual lives',⁷⁵ and the poet himself told Eric Mottram in 1974: 'I've come more and more to the point where I've returned to thinking about people in our society, in their environment, not as individuals'.⁷⁶ Increasingly then, the overwhelming sense of loss in his poetry concerns the despoliation of Newcastle's outlying industrial landscape and the human resonance of such changes, dominating themes which are pursued in a *Memos* related draft:

Home after home. Family after family. Child after child

Hewer after hewer

⁷² 'Geordieus Unbound', Archive: BM: 2/2.

⁷³ 'Mizzle Through Slats', Archive: BM: 2/2. Also, In 'Geordieus Unbound': 'queues / wind like sad snakes from Grainger / Street to Cushy Butterfulds / owld hoose.' (Archive: BM: 2/2)

⁷⁴ Ibid.

⁷⁵ 'Barry MacSweeney', *Guardian*.

⁷⁶ *Poetry Information*, p. 34.

[...]

too busy, too blind,
to see the miners' lights go out.⁷⁷

In *Ranter*,

chimneys and derelict sites,
burning rubbish in back lanes
[...]
Families gathering in silent gangs.⁷⁸

In *Demons*,

angry handshakes and solitary exchanges
at the closure of another
worldwide great shipyard.⁷⁹

in *False Lapwing* ('no more coal dust or lead')⁸⁰ and in *Postcards*: 'security men, born to be welder apprentices at closed-down shipyards [...] shift-earners in devastated collieries from here to Vane Tempest, England, UK'.⁸¹ In the manuscript lyrics 'Black Spur' and 'Mizzle Through Slats', these local socio-political issues also persist in lines such as 'blaze in Tyne Yards'.⁸² Yet it is the vernacular rhythms of 'Geordieus', enlivened by the activism of the era, which epitomise this phase of MacSweeney's work, capturing the zeitgeist of his native city in poetry sated with regional attitude, dialect and detail:

⁷⁷ 'The Virgin of Tenderness moves evil hearts', Archive: BM: 1/17/1.

⁷⁸ *Ranter*, p. 23.

⁷⁹ 'Daddy Wants To Murder Me', *Demons*, p. 46.

⁸⁰ 'Pearl Standing Alone In Sparty Moonlight'.

⁸¹ 'I am Lucifer', *Postcards*.

⁸² 'Mizzle Through Slats', Archive: BM: 2/2.

He howked wor public
 cash and built hooses up in
 Ponteland and Cramlington for ees corrupt marras.

wor youngun's
 got more aa can tell yi. He
 talks of noble things like
 freedom from the dole and
 open pits, of stringing up
 these plush arsed bastards
 who wrecked the integrity
 of Newcastle.⁸³

MacSweeney's concern with socio-industrial devastation is inevitable considering his personal proximity to the events, with the majority of late twentieth century shipyard closures in the region occurring between 1960 and 1993 and thus within the compass of his career.⁸⁴ Some of his earliest work forebodingly prefigures such changes, for whilst 'To Lyn at Work' contains allusions to the still operational Quayside industries ('wharf-side houses and stores', 'red tug', 'shipping offices', 'dusty navvies [...] with knotted hankies on their broad heads'), it also recognises the emergence of professions centred away from the river hub: 'pedestrians this way down to / Mosley Street and back to work'.⁸⁵ As well as recording the human impact of such developments ('more Geordies / off / to Spain')⁸⁶ he focuses on the visual iconography formed by the structural remnants of defunct industry, the very subsistence of which beyond the aftermath of the closures and particularly in their state of abandoned inertia, became the most poignantly self-contained symbol of the region's tumultuous experience:

⁸³ 'Geordieus Unbound', Archive: BM: 2/2.

⁸⁴ Although MacSweeney lived briefly in France and in other parts of England he regularly returned to the North East, his revisitations chronicled in the untitled poem beginning: 'Venus pencil ribbons the page' which contains the line: 'Awoke / going North East resurrection's / hollow house', BM: 1/4/4.

⁸⁵ *The Boy*, p. 2.

⁸⁶ 'Soft Hail', Archive. BM: 1/17/1.

‘Giant wheels left to oxidise / Rats running tunnels / Where men worked’,⁸⁷ ‘shreds / lie dumped / in post- / industrial theme / parks’.⁸⁸ The entrenched provincial significance of this machinery warrants its poetic expediency, but for MacSweeney it also held weight as an emblematic feature in the recalled landscape of his youth which allowed him to imbue its depiction with an additional sense of private bereavement: ‘gone like the shipyards I knew / and the collieries where I looked on pit-heads as if they were cathedrals / standing above the horizons’.⁸⁹ The multi-faceted employment of this single motif is further evident in the poet’s use of it in empathetic characterisation (‘They closed my pit and then my shipyard and made me into a broken man’)⁹⁰ and in his earnest lament for the region’s elapsed histories:

Tom, can you hear the final slowing down spin of the flywheel
as the last cage ascends?

Tom, these are real men with faces like pandas
carrying badgerbrocks of coal. It’s a memento now.

This place, Tom, *was* a nation, making trains and ships and cranes.⁹¹

The consequence for MacSweeney of this particular era is apparent both from the heated intensity with which the topic is addressed, and (again) in the infiltration of its related imagery into virtually every phase of his verse. In ‘JURY VET MEETS CANDACE BAHOUTH’, he bathetically counters references to ‘Thea Cadabra’ and fantastical footwear (‘yellow Satin / batshoes!’) with the resonant final image of a miner’s boots: ‘Mouldy toecaps bring / me / Home’,⁹² whilst in the rural *Blackbird* he utilises the relatively obscure Donne quotation ‘coal with o’erblowing quench’d’ to anticipate the mining / shipbuilding amalgam

⁸⁷ ‘Wild Returns: Gale Hits Jury Vet Probe’, Archive, BM: 1/10/1.

⁸⁸ ‘Soft Hail’, Archive. BM: 1/17/1.

⁸⁹ ‘My Former Darling Country Wrong or Wrong’, *Postcards*.

⁹⁰ ‘Walker Dan Two’, *Zero Hero*, Archive: BM: 1/20/1.

⁹¹ ‘John Bunyan To Johnny Rotten’, *Demons*, p. 103. Similarly: ‘Tom there’s a spoil heap in every village without a colliery [...] Tom there’s a silent flywheel on every horizon sequestered by law / & severed from use’, (‘Tom In The Market Square Outside Boots’, *Demons*, p. 101).

⁹² *Tempers*, pp. 235-337.

in ‘digested to mucus / in swan’s belly’.⁹³ Other examples of industrial imagery feature amidst the maniacal diatribes of *Demons* where his adversary becomes a historical fusion of hated figures (‘they crucified the miners / with Pharisees and cavalry [...] the Duke of Cumberland and Lord Londonderry / rolled into one’)⁹⁴ and later, a mysterious generic threat: ‘They have been here, they have killed the miners, they have / killed the swannemerchants’.⁹⁵ Whilst in *Memos* the poet uses political satire to suggest the uncertain employment status and improbability of redemption for both himself and his native city: ‘Nothing will bring me back [...] no award-winning / regional disease, coal mines for example’.⁹⁶ MacSweeney’s poignant evocation of unemployment, industrial illness and thwarted desire in the line: ‘Swan Hunter asbestosis victims / men from the shut collieries / Unknown bonfires of the heart / Rainbows never seen’.⁹⁷ and his proclivity for vitriolic soapbox raving: ‘and you – you scabs – swank and wank on wine – all free / in the middle of the Durham coalfield. What coal!!?’⁹⁸ all serve to develop this theme. Yet most striking is his increasingly adept manipulation of the jargon and components of the fading industries themselves to inscribe their import whilst inferring the resounding impact of their annihilation. In the *Memos* era poem ‘Basic Slag: The Hymn’, for example, the lexicon of the mining industry is contorted to suggest ranks of sexual commodity and thus the adaptation of linguistics to differing social climes: ‘those offered a choice of slags will do well to consult their organiser’.⁹⁹ Whilst a lyric from

⁹³ *Blackbird*. Each stanza in the first section of this poem contains an underlined Donne quotation, this one from ‘The Progresse of the Soule’ (First Song, XXIII), *The Complete English Poems*, ed. by C.A. Patrides, intro. & updated by Robin Hamilton (London: Everyman, 1985), p. 323. The use of ‘swan’s belly’ is taken by the author to infer the inner workings of the Swan Hunter shipyard. MacSweeney’s allusions to ‘coal’ evoke Shelley’s *A Defence of Poetry* (‘the mind in creation is as a fading coal, which some invisible influence, like an inconstant wind, awakens to transitory brightness’) to which he alludes in his early letters as a source of inspiration (Kessinger Publishing Rare Reprints, p. 42) and also Shelley’s translation of ‘Homer’s Hymn to Mercury’: ‘And when he saw that everything was clear, / He quenched the coal, and trampled the black dust,’ *Poetical Works*, ed. Thomas Hutchinson (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1970), p. 685.

⁹⁴ ‘Tom In The Market Square Outside Boots’, *Demons*, p. 100.

⁹⁵ ‘Don’t Leave Me’, *Wolf Tongue*, p. 299.

⁹⁶ ‘Today we walk by love’, *Memos*, p. 14. A different regional identification exists in ‘Pearl’s New Dawn & Silverdew: ‘Close my pit villages / my collieries, put my children into glueyfaces’ (Archive: BM: 1/19/2).

⁹⁷ ‘The Dollbird/Redblonde’, *Horses*, p. 63.

⁹⁸ ‘Good Times Gone Truly Bad’, Archive: BM: 1/19/2.

⁹⁹ Archive: BM: 1/17/1.

Postcards contains perhaps the definitive instance of the mode, eloquently delimiting the issues involved without subjecting them to simplification in the emotionally fraught lines:

The frequency and zenith of betrayals has almost left me frantically agape
and riveted to a million wild points and profits of unwelded behaviour
[...]
my poetic headland beaming like a leadminer's lamp'.¹⁰⁰

Anarchy on Tyneside: The Years of Social Disintegration:

Despite MacSweeney's preoccupation with such poignant, retrograde motifs, the metropolis' broader appraisal in his work from *Black Torch* onwards was dominated by the more urgent social consequences of Newcastle's 1970s upheavals as depicted in journalist Nick Danziger's first-hand record of Newcastle during this era. In *Danziger's Britain* the author identifies the city's primary problems, and those expressly affecting the juvenile population as: joyriding ('crashed into a fence that holds pedestrians back from walking into the roundabout', p. 68), arson ('a child trying to set a building on fire with a flame thrower made from an aerosol can', p. 76), the high teenage birth rate ("if they're pregnant or get a child they get money, if they're not they don't", p. 82) and widespread substance abuse ('in the corner of the room he pulled a plastic bag full of glue from inside his anorak', p. 78).¹⁰¹ The concurrence between Danziger's journalistic record and MacSweeney's lyrical one is partly a symptom of their mutual occupation, but these similarities also underline the latter's knowledge of his subject. This requisite intimacy is further accentuated by Danziger's assertion that the frequency of such crimes (combined with the agenda of the city's desperate promoters) had begun to limit its reportage: 'Neither the arson attack nor the crash involving the joyriders was reported in

¹⁰⁰ 'My Former Darling Country Wrong or Wrong', *Postcards*.

¹⁰¹ Nick Danziger, *Danziger's Britain* (London: Flamingo. 1997), pp. 65-91.

the local papers. The police later told me [...] “You’d need another riot””.¹⁰² MacSweeney’s alertness to such civic instabilities and frustration with the ignorance of city administrators, undoubtedly motivated his return to urban-specifics in *Memos*, a sequence he claimed was prompted by the nationally documented Meadowell Riots of 1991, despite their never being referenced in the poems themselves.¹⁰³ Yet what is patent from MacSweeney’s manuscript drafts from the late 1970s onwards is that such themes were already present in his work, and that rather than constituting a platform for discussion of the already familiar Meadowell, he used *Memos* instead as a catalyst for addressing the impact of such unrest on a citywide basis.

MacSweeney’s Newcastle poetry of the late 1980s and early 1990s, like that of other local chroniclers, seemed drawn to accent the anti-social behaviour of the city’s inhabitants. Yet unlike many contemporaries he refused to fortify national presumptions of hostility and hooliganism (Harrison’s ‘Teenage dole-wallah piss-up, then tattoos’)¹⁰⁴ and focussed instead, through subtle undercurrents and topographical inference, on the specific nature of the city’s predicament. In a draft composed for the socially sentient *Memos*, the poet frankly confronts Newcastle’s publicly muted drug epidemic with: ‘I ploated the stupid sky [...] to kiss the lips of another: Some glue-sniffer hunched / unconscious in Hood Street’.¹⁰⁵ Here, MacSweeney creates specificity through a blend of dialect and designation and draws a direct connection between the city and its toxic scourge that not only reverberates throughout the remainder of the sequence but imbues any subsequent use of ‘glue’ with a distinctly local resonance. As in the otherwise urban-generic lines:

¹⁰² Ibid, pp. 68-9. The riots cited are those which occurred on the Meadowell Estate in 1991.

¹⁰³ ‘What started me writing again was the Meadowell Riots last summer in North Shields [...] The North East at the moment appears, whereas it used to have a reputation for building ships, giving the world electricity, giving the world coal [...] there isn’t any of that now. It gives the world joy riders and ram raiders’ (Interview/conversation with Maggie O’Sullivan, transcribed by Paul Batchelor).

¹⁰⁴ ‘Divisions’, *Selected Poems*, p. 173.

¹⁰⁵ Archive: BM: 1/17/1. Although these lines did survive in essentially the same form in the final version of ‘Linda Manning is a Whore’ (*Memos*, p. 15) (although here the addict is ‘sprawled’ rather than ‘hunched’), the additional reference in the earlier draft to ‘those prepared to steal for a season ticket’ makes this verse even more specific in its allusion to the early 1990s where demand was so high for such tickets that Newcastle United implemented a £500 ‘bond’ scheme in order to regulate those able to purchase them.

when on the estate they threaten to burn me alive
 I throw in their glue-sniff faces Rudyard Kipling's
 redundant badge.¹⁰⁶

And in relation to the characters who:

avoid council tax
 rape women of any age,
 deal in nicked videos,
 put bets on pit bulls and not dogs and horses,
 small up allotments, glueyed, hooched.¹⁰⁷

In the poem 'Flashboard Dashboard' MacSweeney repeats this correlation in the juxtaposition of 'Central Station', 'Stowell Street' and 'Do you know any braindead geezers / I can mug to pay for a bag of glue'. In a gesture of community increasingly common in his later work he is willing to implicate himself in the wider situation by proffering his own habit in the v.-esque exchange: 'Why don't you go to the Plummer Court addiction centre? [...] Been there myself / through booze not glue'.¹⁰⁸ In 'Wild Meubles', he focuses on the local joyriding culture, marking his location with 'coast road' and 'Longbenton crossroads' and constructing a poem saturated with familiar images of calamitous teenage escapism: 'GTi: hooligan', 'Speeding', 'radial tyre', 'mangled', 'mccain oven chips', 'bairn's fucked / face'. MacSweeney's horrific scene-setting here is also darkly juxtaposed with intimations of an equally violent counter-reaction which patently stresses the mass implications of the social crises besetting the city: 'beat / the cunts the rest of the year till they're / crippled black and blue, only answer'.¹⁰⁹

¹⁰⁶ 'Hellhound Memo Ho-ho-ho', Archive: BM: 1/17/1.

¹⁰⁷ 'Good Times Gone Truly Bad', Archive: BM: 1/19/2.

¹⁰⁸ 'Flashboard Dashboard', Archive: BM: 1/20/1. Although, like Harrison, MacSweeney is here rebuked by his alter ego for offering his companionship.

¹⁰⁹ Archive: BM: 1/17/1.

That these destructive, frantic urban cityscapes are a feature of MacSweeney's work often singled out for critical praise is partly owing to the poet's affecting ability to instil his scenes with a sense of collusion ('he's *part* of the urban terror (*is* an urban terror?')¹¹⁰ and partly due to the linguistic intensity or 'constant verbal exuberance and conspicuous, register-blending, excess' that typify their depiction.¹¹¹ Their appeal was also national, in that many of their concerns were applicable to other British cities at the time, and the accessibility of the *Memos* was aided further by their frequently unspecific or chaotic topographies: 'I used to be nowhere, now I'm all over the place':¹¹² a generic quality which enabled Barry to conduct an eleven side dialogue on them without having cause to mention Newcastle at all.¹¹³ Yet there is another stratum to these poems chiefly evident in their manuscript versions, which reveals that beneath their proffered locative fluidity they are subliminally peppered with Newcastle references which provide their anarchic incidents with an undeniably specific backdrop. In the poem 'Revulsion (Torvill and Dean)' which might be assumed by its subheading as a 'State of the Nation' piece to be a countrywide treatise, MacSweeney's markers exist not just in the dialect use of 'bairns' but in the politically resonant 'Fancy / Dan'; in an ironic allusion to the local attitude to incomers: 'We misunderstand / every visitor'; in the inescapable spectre of the city's past: 'We / look at ancient photographs / and live inside / their distant / Rim'; its modern role as entertainment centre for the masses: 'We drink and drink / playing perfect / Host / to all that's (*fucked*)', and most obviously in the patent football image: 'we leave behind the / black & white'.¹¹⁴ In an analogous format, 'Hellhound Rapefield Memos' employs two allusions to a major local landmark in as many lines ('Filth it vis a monument',

¹¹⁰ Peter Manson, 'Barry MacSweeney: *Hellhound Memos*'.

¹¹¹ Peter Barry, 'Barry MacSweeney *Hellhound Memos*', p. 76.

¹¹² 'Me the multiplex moron', *Memos*, p. 7.

¹¹³ 'Barry MacSweeney *Hellhound Memos*'. Although 'Gallowgate' is mentioned a couple of times and 'Hood Street' once within the published *Memos*, there is no reference to Newcastle, Meadowell or any other recognisable city location, and whilst Peter Barry uses 'Newcastle' on the final page of his discussion, it is in reference to MacSweeney and Bunting's common origin, and not to the setting of the poems themselves.

¹¹⁴ Archive: BM: 1/17/1.

‘monument’), alongside examples of ‘Charver’¹¹⁵ behaviour (‘pinting gob of wayside spit’) and apparel (‘Devil in a pink shell-suit’),¹¹⁶ whilst another contemporaneous lyric ‘Hellhound Memo: No Dropzone Visible’ conjoins the activities of ‘the local police’ with ‘Effort must be enhanced to still the swing bridges’ in order to imply the specificity of the locale.¹¹⁷

Whilst relatively few of MacSweeney’s specific Newcastle designations suffer vast repetition, the emergence of ‘Gallowgate’ as a devoted concern during this era of his work is a crucial exception. The reasons for this area’s elevation are several and include its longevity (its oldest features are honoured in the use of ‘Sidgate’ and ‘Darn Crook’),¹¹⁸ its proximity to the city walls and Morden Tower and its gorily compelling significance as the site of the city’s public hangings until 1844. Yet it is also the modern functions of the locale that attract MacSweeney, it being – until recently – the site of Newcastle’s famous brewery, and still the home of the poet’s much loved football team. Such factors ensured that Gallowgate’s representation in his work was infused with images of the iconic Newcastle Breweries ‘blue star’ (or the symbol of ‘the manufacturer’s propaganda’ to which the poet was ‘slave’),¹¹⁹ its ruinous product, or the product’s effect (‘maniac milk’) and the equally, if differently demoralizing and uplifting experiences embodied in Newcastle United’s club colours: ‘under

¹¹⁵ Although the use of ‘Charver’ to denote a specific social group identified by their clothing, language and behaviour has been current in the North East for at least 10 years, Bill Griffiths’ *A Dictionary of North-East Dialect* has the first written use in 2001 and defines the meaning somewhat ironically as: ‘club-goer or other alert young citizen of Newcastle “charver – rough person”, Newc. 2001 Q.’ (p. 28).

¹¹⁶ Archive: BM: 1/17/1. Either ‘the monument’ or ‘monument’ is the colloquial designation for Grey’s Monument, a typical city centre meeting place for Newcastle residents.

¹¹⁷ ‘Hellhound Memo: No Dropzone Visible’, Archive: BM: 1/17/1.

¹¹⁸ ‘Darn Crook to Sidgate’ in ‘I Looked Down on a Child Today’, *Wolf Tongue*, p. 314 and ‘There are a million Sundays which I will never ever see or speak of / Darn Crook Amen Corner down by The Side’ (‘I Love You But No’, *Horses*, p. 60).

¹¹⁹ Andrew Duncan, ‘Kicking Shit with Arvel Watson and C. Day Lewis: Part 2 of the review of *Conductors of Chaos*’, <http://www.poetrymagazines.org.uk/magazine/record.asp?id=13915>. [accessed 18 September 2007] Duncan includes in a critical appreciation of *Memos* his views on MacSweeney’s addiction: ‘Alcoholism puts you in a master-slave relationship with the manufacturer, and replaces your fantasies with the manufacturer’s propaganda, while negating the value that any living person could have for you’. He also notes that ‘MacSweeney refers three times in his poem here to “maniac milk”: it would be quicker if he just said “alcohol”’. Yet although the “maniac milk” is undoubtedly alcohol related, its contextual description (‘bilious pools of maniac milk’, ‘The darkness fell’, *Memos*, p. 23) suggests that it is the vomit resulting from over-indulgence rather than alcohol itself.

the black and white sky'.¹²⁰ Yet what distinguishes Gallowgate's portrayal is that it typically emerges as a synthesis of all these components, encapsulating the coexistent possibility of tragedy and joy in the duality of its motifs, from the sex/death dynamic of 'Those wonderful legs in Gallowgate on which your skirt flows like a river / And these Villonesque men hung from the gallows',¹²¹ to the concurrent histories implied in the paradoxical line, 'an elegant but unassuming place where as a living they hanged prisoners for / bread-theft / it was the eve of St. Valentine's Day'.¹²² To MacSweeney's credit, any satirical parallels between the forms of mass entertainment traditionally performed on the site are implicit rather than overdone, although working-class militancy persists in the Geordie males who 'swank delirious with gallons of snakebite / on what common ground's left'¹²³ and the socially ostracised are still drawn to this desolate locale to await their destiny: 'Sleet penetrates the weave. / Chapped fingers play the bottleneck / at Gallowgate crossroads'.¹²⁴ The site's provincial significance as the former location of the city's coach station and thus an adolescent means of escape from the suffocating city, is not specifically explored by MacSweeney as it is by Bill Griffiths in 'Newcastle from a Van Window' or Tom Pickard in 'Fragments from an Archaeological Dig', but it is implied in: 'Robert passed on the bus at Gallowgate and waved / a last farewell'.¹²⁵

That Gallowgate constituted a powerful image for MacSweeney may be seen in his lyrical returns to the site ('Once more at Gallowgate'),¹²⁶ yet less obvious are his reasons for persistently allying the location in his later work with notions of biblical retribution, from 'When will we be shaved? When purged and cleansed'¹²⁷ and 'Red and deep blood running at

¹²⁰ 'Hellhound Memo: Terrifying Text Jan 10 1993', Archive: BM: 1/17/1.

¹²¹ 'Fancy Nancy', *Horses*, p. 72.

¹²² 'I Looked Down On a Child Today', *Wolf Tongue*, p. 314.

¹²³ 'Garbled Manifest', *Memos*, p. 19.

¹²⁴ 'The darkness fell', *Memos*, p. 23

¹²⁵ 'Mary Bell Sonnets' [53], Archive: BM: 2/9/1.

¹²⁶ 'Hellhound Memo: Terrifying Text Jan 10 1993', Archive: BM: 1/17/1. The same line occurs in 'Silent is the house: all are laid asleep', *Memos*, p. 21.

¹²⁷ 'Hellhound Memo: Terrifying Text Jan 10 1993', Archive: BM: 1/17/1. Such 'purification' is biblically linked with the condition of leprosy, which is 'one of those diseases that many interpreted as God's punishment'

the Gallowgate crossroads'¹²⁸ to the later and even more extreme, 'I will call upon all of the locusts of Israel to drop from the heavens / And eat their way through Gallowgate and eat out the eyes of the dead'.¹²⁹ Such description is often, and justifiably, taken to represent the poet's apocalyptic vision of 'the ultimate, vapoury baselessness of the urban fabric'.¹³⁰ A promotional pamphlet for *Memos* cites this religious link in, 'swapping vital information with Robert Johnson and the Jesus Christ Almighty at midnight at the Gallowgate crossroads',¹³¹ and Peter Barry shows how the final *Memo* 'ends with a note of blighted spiritual yearning' and a city 'dependent for rescue and re-alignment on a saviour figure (a Batman, or a Jesus Christ)'.¹³² Yet the specificity of this bond has additional significance in that the correlation between Gallowgate and Christ, which is organised around the hanging/crucifixion/crossroads motif is primarily a deliberate corruption of the Robert Johnson legend in which the devil and not Jesus waits at the intersection.¹³³ It is a loaded substitution that refracts throughout the site's layered histories, evoking violent injustice, questions of relative idolatry, male passion, sin and excess ('tattooed dad, flung pissed out into / Gallowgate')¹³⁴ which are amplified at this juncture in the poet's career by an intensification in his use of religious vocabulary.¹³⁵

('Outside the Camp?: Leprosy, AIDS and the Bible', Kenneth R. Overberg, S.J., <http://www.americancatholic.org/Newsletters/SFS/an1098.asp> [accessed 12 May 2006]

¹²⁸ 'Silent is the house: all are laid asleep', *Memos*, p. 21.

¹²⁹ 'I Love You But No', *Horses*, p. 59. The extreme nature of this image is partly due to its derivation from Apollinaire's '*La corde au cou comme à Calais / Sur ma douleur quel holocauste*' which Oliver Bernard translates as '*And dammed souls with a gallows stare / All my misery appal*' (Apollinaire, *Selected Poems*, p. 47), yet Apollinaire's version is allusive rather than specific: speaking of the 'cord around the neck' rather than the *gibet* (gallows) themselves, underlining MacSweeney's attempt to make his 'translation' more redolent of particular place.

¹³⁰ 'Barry MacSweeney *Hellhound Memos*', pp. 74-6.

¹³¹ Pamphlet published by The Many Press. Archive: BM 1/17/2.

¹³² 'Barry MacSweeney *Hellhound Memos*', pp. 74-6.

¹³³ According to Phil Harland in '"Me and the Devil Blues": Robert Johnson and the crossroads', 'The notion that the crossroads or intersection outside of town was a magical place where the-powers-that-be were especially potent has a long history. But a specific legend grew up in the context of the emergence of the blues which also attached itself to Johnson himself. In particular, there was the notion that in order to gain exceptional skill at playing the blues, a person might meet the devil at the crossroads and make a deal, with the soul being the precious item in the devil's sight', <http://www.philipharland.com/Blog/2006/01/24/me-and-the-devil-blues-robert-johnson-and-the-crossroads> [accessed 18 September 2007]

¹³⁴ 'Garbled Manifest', *Memos*, p. 19.

¹³⁵ MacSweeney's draft and published poetry from the early 1990s onwards show a significant increase in religious references. In the archive section: BM 1/18/2: *Pearl* (Draft B, 1993-94) this includes: 'to meet the harsh demanding love and light of God', 'God moves on the water' and 'Did she see Jerusalem as we did? / Did she identify the ruby heart of the Jesus Christ Almighty'. This trend may be linked to the poet's rehabilitation

Yet this harshly retributive vision of Gallowgate is not absolute, for in the remarkable poem ‘I Looked Down on A Child Today’ which postdates *Memos*, the motifs of death, beauty and religion are harmoniously aligned as the poet recalls with an eerie calm his being witness to a fatality: ‘Gallowgate, the bus was turning left / the child stepped out, leaving its mam’s hand behind partly swept by the wind’. It is an event that becomes the improbable catalyst for perhaps the most tenderly inclusive illustration of central Newcastle in the poet’s oeuvre: ‘What a beautiful, brilliant day, tart with expectation of love and romance in Chinatown’.¹³⁶

Some of the darkest and most explicit of MacSweeney’s Newcastle cityscapes exist in the mostly unpublished sequence: ‘Blood Money: The Marvellous Secret Sonnets of Mary Bell: Child Killer’, a series composed when the poet set out to assess Bell’s case from their common perspective as abused children after witnessing *Sun* reporters bribing Newcastle pedestrians to sign a petition to re-jail her. The resulting poems are inevitably traumatic in their portrayal of a sexually dissolute society which traps and contorts the character of Bell: ‘In Scotswood / if you didn’t screw when you were nine-years-old / the grown-ups wouldn’t give you Tyne Brand food / & said you were anyway a complete twat’.¹³⁷ Written in 1998, this series is largely retrospective: centring on the 1950s and 1960s city of Bell and the poet’s childhoods and projecting their private miseries onto the already stark landscapes: ‘chased / into the dark back-streets of Scotswood’ [3], ‘Rats [...] running up the drainpipe, next to the broken wire’ [39], ‘I longed for the Vickers factory lorries to churn / out carbon monoxide and dust’ [60]. The alternating narrative voices in this sequence are disconcerting, as the ‘I’ switches between the poet, Mary Bell, Pearl and others so as to juxtapose their experiences: ‘I’m not shifting / until Pearl and Mary are one’ [90]. Yet what ‘Mary Bell’ achieves – if one is able to contend with the gritty desolation of its subject – is a sense of Bell’s imprisonment

from addiction at this time, or perhaps to his mother’s contemporaneous adoption of the Christian religion, either of which would ensure that such themes were prevalent in his mind.

¹³⁶ *Wolf Tongue*, p314. The use of ‘tart’ is clearly included for its double meaning, trading on the assumptions evoked by the poem’s references to Newcastle nightlife.

¹³⁷ ‘Mary Bell Sonnets’ [I], Archive: BM: 2/9/1.

within the impoverished district into which she is born: ‘Can you imagine the total darkness of deepest Scotswood?’ [38]. A total captivity which is intensified by her pathetic yearning for adjacent locales: ‘I longed even for Newburn, Stocksfield, Throckley / down by a cleaner stretch of the Tyne’ [38] and MacSweeney’s twinning of her with the less violent, but also imprisoned Pearl: ‘Mary look towards the light this is Pearl do not forever flee’ [107]. These sonnets are at times gruesome, but they are also some of the most locative and era-specific work in the poet’s oeuvre: ‘They came from Fenham’ [1], ‘Frank said in Second Avenue’ [3], ‘Cradlewell’ [6], ‘100 Wingrove Road’ [27], ‘He was a flash lad, Denton’ [42].¹³⁸

MacSweeney’s frequently desolate, hostile and violent poetry from this period marks his personal response to an especially turbulent era of contemporary urban history: one which effected an overwhelming malaise in the city’s literary depiction typified by poems such as Linda France’s ‘Quayside’: ‘the bridge lift is full of piss / laced with cosmetic chemicals’.¹³⁹ The intensity of his cityscapes was moreover fuelled by his mature proximity, both physically and psychologically, to a rich urban source material which allowed him to be both specific and nationally relevant, using his town as a template for ‘your average track and suit city / terrorist is not akin to’.¹⁴⁰ Yet in the poet’s *Memos* allusion to ‘playing [...] Host’; in his sinister references to the city’s economic function (‘brilliant / blue star. The temple is open, money on the tables’), and in the increasingly ‘city centre’ focussed poetry which followed that sequence, exists his awareness of the early stages of a cultural revolution which was to consume Newcastle as it strove to reinstate itself as a major city in the post-industrial era.¹⁴¹ This controversial sea-change, characterised by the propagandist terminology of urban studies such as: ‘Northern Soul: Culture, creativity, and quality of place in Newcastle and Gateshead’

¹³⁸ MacSweeney left instructions that the ‘Mary Bell Sonnets’ were not to be included in his *Selected Poems* but did not suggest whether it was their brutality, specificity or simply their unfinished state that impelled this decision.

¹³⁹ *Red* (Newcastle upon Tyne, Bloodaxe Books, 1992), p. 40.

¹⁴⁰ ‘No Mercy’, Archive: BM: 1/17/1.

¹⁴¹ ‘Hellhound Memos and Terrifying Text’; Archive: BM 1/17/1.

(2003) which acclaims the success of an evolution ‘from coal city to culture city’ achieved through ‘urban entrepreneurship’ and the repackaged retention of the city’s ‘spirit or soul’, was anathema to the poet,¹⁴² and in lyrics written ten years earlier he foresaw the upheavals it would entail. In the archive poem ‘Hellhound Memos and Terrifying Text’, he envisions the private enterprise being hailed as the key to the city’s emancipation as inexperienced ‘bright [...] children’ guided by external shadowy ‘purchasers’: the orchestrators of doom for the local populace: ‘there will be more darkness for us all’.¹⁴³ In ‘No Mercy’ he regards the proliferation of individual wealth as responsible for the emergence of a new, perilous civic power: ‘Arrogance of Porsche and Jag / threaten every footfall’ and recognises the – now inescapable – reputation of the city in ‘the party people of Newcastle upon Tyne’.¹⁴⁴

MacSweeney’s priority here, like that of North East poets Keith Armstrong and Bill Griffiths, is to expose the crass superficiality and paradoxical duality of the city’s propagated façade: ‘Semblance of democracy / Semblance of real life / deep scars not expressed’.¹⁴⁵ Yet although intimations of a ‘recycled’ Newcastle and an awareness of layered histories forced to coexist in an uncomfortable fusion of past and present do exist in his work, these are often implicit, and thus distinct from the overt mode of Armstrong’s ‘William Blake in the Bridge Hotel’ (‘The cultural ships are fair steaming in / but it’s all stripped of meaning’)¹⁴⁶ or the powerful examination of the shared physical arenas of historical and modern urban activity: those of manufacture and art; of sea fishing and cocktail bars in Griffiths’ *Newcastle Through*

¹⁴² Anna Minton. This report was the result of a joint project between DEMOS and RICS (The Royal Institute of Chartered Surveyors), <http://www.demos.co.uk/catalogue/northernsoul> [accessed 27 May 2006]. It is used here to provide a contrasting example of the lexicons employed by the city’s ‘re-packagers’, and their removal from the social realities with which MacSweeney and other North East poets were concerned.

¹⁴³ Archive: BM: 1/17/1. Dated ‘Dec 16 1992’.

¹⁴⁴ ‘No Mercy’, *ibid.*

¹⁴⁵ ‘The wind is beautiful tonight, Jac’, Archive: BM: 1/18/2. The context of the first quotation is: ‘The wind is beautiful tonight, Jac / west to east, amazing the fjords / ignored by the party people of Newcastle upon Tyne / diving into their pineapple grills / for a slow collapse (gradual expensive)’.

¹⁴⁶ Keith Armstrong, <http://www.writeoutloud.net/public/poetview.php?poetID=114>. [accessed 18 September 2007]. In his poem ‘Paradise’, Sean O’Brien expresses the working-class attitude towards the artistic renovation of Newcastle with: ‘You say, when I hear the word / *Culture*, I reach for my arse / With both hands. Then I kiss it goodbye’, *Ghost Train* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995), p. 42.

a Van Window.¹⁴⁷ This dissimilarity is partly chronological, for whilst during the late 1980s and early 1990s Robert Crawford had tackled Glasgow's altered landscapes and the cultural appropriation of that city's industrial iconography in lines such as 'The quays have altered, liners replaced by jasmine [...] Steam-rivets us to ghosts we love, in murals', such changes (typified by the construction of the Sage centre for music and the Millennium 'eye') did not fully impact upon Newcastle for another decade, and were thus too late for MacSweeney to witness.¹⁴⁸ Yet the decisive absence of lamentation, particularly from the poet's late work, was also a conscious choice, impelled perhaps by the recent abundance of such themes in 'regional' writing, but also by the stylistic transmutations that his work underwent in the final stages of his career, and by his evident determination in *Horses* not to satirise or elegise the city but to celebrate it in his own inimitable fashion.

Newcastle Reborn: MacSweeney's Definitive City:

In *Demons* and 'Mary Bell', MacSweeney's projective rendition of his private traumas and decision to 'investigatively' confront the topic of a local child killer resulted in his creation of some relentlessly severe, tortured and generically rendered cityscapes: 'the cobbled gutter's facedown drenched hell'.¹⁴⁹ The despondent local referencing in *Postcards* ('My weepy Bar / when Newcastle lost Andy Cole')¹⁵⁰ and his contemporaneous longing for places other than his native city ('I'm nicking off from here / from the once coaly Tyne') seemed to suggest that Newcastle as a figure in his work was beyond positive redemption.¹⁵¹ Yet in the midst of all of this, MacSweeney was simultaneously composing *Horses in Boiling Blood*, a collection which not only evinces a new poetic perspective on the city, but which is the most devoted and affectionate of his career in its engaging portraits of Newcastle's contemporary character.

¹⁴⁷ *Tyne Txts* (Seaham: Amra Imprint, 2004)

¹⁴⁸ Robert Crawford, 'Inner Glasgow', in *A Scottish Assembly* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1990), p. 27.

¹⁴⁹ 'Buying Christmas Wrapping Paper On January 12', *Demons*, p. 41.

¹⁵⁰ 'Lucifer', *Postcards*.

¹⁵¹ 'Ode and Elegy: Fidel I'm here!' (Song of the Cuban Niggers)', Archive: BM: 2/10/5.

The *Horses* poems' strong foundation in the work of Apollinaire is crucial in distinguishing them from MacSweeney's previous literary cities: imbuing them with the style and spirit of his French predecessor, his 'enthusiastic affirmation of modernity, of the city and its eclectic, cosmopolitan diversity, mobility and vitality'.¹⁵² Yet the joyful inhibition of MacSweeney's writing here also benefited from at least two other novel factors. The first is his decision to poetically annexe his city, exploiting an ingrained national perception by establishing it as an almost sovereign entity and thus saving it from the apocalyptic demise he saw engulfing the rest of the country: 'behind the poor wire fencing England is a ghastly mistake / a stupidly crazed machine without gears'.¹⁵³ The second, evident in his unapologetic rendering of local culture and in his inscription of his own collusive participation in it ('Northumberland Street, Newcastle-upon-Tyne / it was filled with women of unusual hue and fantastic attraction / I would say that being a horny male poet on the rebound'), was a newly benevolent attitude towards the city indicative of a maturely attained confidence in the legitimacy of his own distinctive and hard-won poetic style.¹⁵⁴

This sense of redemption, of reconciliation, of celebrating Newcastle for what it currently was rather than through the lexicons of what had been lost, is incarnate in the poem 'I Love You But No' where MacSweeney cites the city's final recovery from the architectural travesties of the 1960s: 'Next to the Pizza Express the Grainger Street experiment / was coming to fruition a city sore being mended' before going on, with a dose of the wry defiance which typifies this collection, to imagine Newcastle's most commercially vibrant boulevard as an almost heavenly concourse: 'Northumbria is surely and I mean forever the Promised

¹⁵² Tony McNeill, 'An Introduction to Guillaume Apollinaire', <http://www.sunderland.ac.uk/~os0tmc/apo/aponotes.htm> [accessed 18 September 2007]

¹⁵³ 'Ode Lament', Archive: BM: 2/10/5. Having exempted Newcastle from such censure, it is Durham and Sunderland in his mature works which instead incur his localised socialist wrath.

¹⁵⁴ 'Feast of Fashion Burning Down Zone', Archive: BM: 2/6.

Land / The complete home of women in white walking down Northumberland Street'.¹⁵⁵ Yet affirmative renderings of the city were neither new to MacSweeney's writing, nor confined to *Horses*, for even amongst his darkest urban cityscapes in 'Mary Bell' there exist partial positives such as: 'O rain in the centre of Newcastle! / Sweet lean rain'.¹⁵⁶ Other examples of such buoyant sentiment also exist in earlier work: in an unpublished *Memos* draft where MacSweeney voices his flagrant native pride in a transforming affirmation of the city and its people:

this is Newcastle
[...]
whose towers
kiss the clouds
[...]
Poverty is scorned & pride is great –
we do not ask for high-viced help.
Our indifference is genuine.
for we are sweet & sanguine & strong.¹⁵⁷

In several instances it is Newcastle's physical form that provides the inspiration for some of the poet's most beautifully pictorial lyrics. Whether recorded as a sweeping vista embodying the integrative serenity of a sphere of modern urban topography:

the chives are so
beautiful tonight, by offshore rigs, mainland
bridges and cranes, and humans walk beneath
the stars by the streaming dark water.¹⁵⁸

¹⁵⁵ 'I Love You But No', *Horses*, pp. 58-59

¹⁵⁶ 'Mary Bell Sonnets' [35], Archive: BM: 2/9/1.

¹⁵⁷ 'But this is Newcastle', Archive: BM: 1/17/1.

¹⁵⁸ 'Demons In My Pocket', *Demons*, p. 60.

ascending
 into the fantastic light
 beyond these numerous bridges
 stapling north to south
 where once the coaly flows: shimmers and winks
 above tides and marks'.¹⁵⁹

Or as a compositely detailed scene awash with vibrant urban designations: 'the wild side of Geordieland', 'from the steps of a 39 bus', 'languorous long-winged stiff-winged fulmars', 'The white dresses being collected from dry cleaners'.¹⁶⁰ The poet's tendency to portray the city enveloped in sunlight as opposed to the popular image embodied in Harrison's contrarily suggestive 'dark' and 'winter's chill',¹⁶¹ further denotes his intrinsic delight in aspects of its incessantly shifting character: 'the sun / came out / after / hail / and / she / was / beautiful / again',¹⁶² 'Today the sun is bright and the trees alive with light'.¹⁶³

The persuasive ingenuousness of MacSweeney's maturely rendered Newcastle lies in its cultural responsiveness. For unlike Harrison's 'Newcastle', composed from a rigid lexicon of era-specific signifiers, MacSweeney's city is more adaptive, journalistic and alert to social mores,¹⁶⁴ traits which enabled the poet to retain his aesthetic and cultural idiosyncrasies – the leitmotif value he placed on certain retrograde facets of the city's composite identity such as 'the Club A Gogo' for example – whilst accommodating the infrastructural and demographic

¹⁵⁹ 'Scontro Finale', Archive: BM: 2/5.

¹⁶⁰ 'I Looked Down on A Child Today', *Wolf Tongue*, p. 314.

¹⁶¹ 'Facing North', *Selected Poems*, p. 190.

¹⁶² 'IN THE CITY [II]', Archive: BM: 1/17/1. Here the poet refers simultaneously to the figure of the lost lover and to the city itself.

¹⁶³ 'Wound closure strips', Archive: BM: 1/19/1.

¹⁶⁴ In the poetic illustration of Newcastle, Leeds and their respective environs, Harrison constructs his depictions around several persistent signifiers: those of traditional industry and its dereliction, inhospitable weather conditions and angry, guarded inhabitants, the repetition of which throughout his work has led to him being criticised for the narrowness of his representations. In 1998, Martin Wainwright compiled a particularly damning commentary berating the monotonous perpetuation of 'the Hovis-wrapped North of redundancies and dismal estates' in which he apportioned a significant amount of the blame on 'our endless flowering of fine writers and artists [who] inadvertently keep the clichéd North alive. The works of Alan Bennett, Tony Harrison et al are not all grit [...] but there is enough of that for the London eye to see it as the Only True North' ('Ciabatta and Hovis', *Guardian*, 1 October 1998).

shifts which occurred within his lifetime.¹⁶⁵ Virtually all of the architectural transformations to take place in and around central Newcastle in the previous forty years are at some point inscribed in his work. From the 1970s launch of the Tyneside Metro system – which thrives as a motif in *Horses* due to its binary use as a signifier for both Newcastle and Paris ('I couldn't see you today at Grey's Monument or the Haymarket / But you were at one of the Metro stations')¹⁶⁶ – to the re-routing of the city's central road network, utilised in the poem 'The Illegal 2CV' as an allegory for fundamental changes in Newcastle's social temperament:

We were on the old A1 and it was utterly distressing

[...]

We turned into Grainger Street and looked at each other lost for words

This tangerine-coloured Deux Chevaux which I was driving illegally

It had brought us up the A167 to a very different world.¹⁶⁷

MacSweeney's wariness of 'popular' locative motifs and their hackneyed treatment is evident in his refusal to particularly acknowledge the widely despised retail overhaul of the city which occurred in the 1970s, an event to which Julia Darling refers in her line: 'We shall pull down Eldon Square and rebuild it as it was. / I shall rebuild Handyside Arcade'.¹⁶⁸ Yet his ability to react to the changing landscape is evident in the topicality of his mature poems, in their terse allusions to the new shopping arenas ('like / a raw begging hand down the mall',¹⁶⁹ 'all the way to Eldon Square / to talk to my biggest friend')¹⁷⁰ and typically vociferous response to the impact of consumerism on the modern city: 'If it isn't in the cheap music stores – Virgin's

¹⁶⁵ 'The double bone in the throat of the street', *Horses*, p. 50.

¹⁶⁶ 'Horses in Boiling Blood or The Fenwick's Third Floor Hair-do', *Horses*, p. 39

¹⁶⁷ 'The Illegal 2CV', *Horses*, p. 43.

¹⁶⁸ 'The Manifesto for Tyneside upon England', <http://www.juliadarling.co.uk/retro/manifesto.html> [accessed 18 September 2007]. MacSweeney's avoidance of this topic implies rather than enforces a preference for the older municipal geography, which he inscribes not by means of the iconic 'Handyside Arcade', but in terms of the privately resonant 'Club A Gogo' which was housed within it.

¹⁶⁹ 'The Tongue Poem', Archive: BM: 1/19/1.

¹⁷⁰ 'Six o'clock', Archive: BM: 1/20/1.

too good for you – / its sneaking down an alley / to a so-called bookshop filled with filth [...] Captain Lud lads – wear leather on their feet / not Singapore plastic’.¹⁷¹

The embodiment of MacSweeney’s celebratory attitude toward the modern city is his mature rendition of the dubiously iconic Bigg Market which explodes into *Horses* an ebullient entity, depicted with a confidence which is not only dismissive of popular opinion but embraces the culture for what it is, and as a part of his own heritage and identity: ‘down the Bigg Market as lager casks were moved into station and the dance floors cleaned’.¹⁷² Early allusions to this notorious hub of Geordie nightlife are muted in his published work:

and as the fragments of “local colour”

return

and haunt with sharp noise

(glass upon raised glass

and thundering tongues)¹⁷³

and stereotyped in his papers: ‘The sun, reminding us of such decay, an eaten mozzarella pizza / puked up last night / in the Bigg Market’;¹⁷⁴ ‘Pepperoni lager vomit floods’;¹⁷⁵ hampered perhaps by the poet’s awareness of middle-class and outsider preconceptions, and by the violent reputation of the locale during the 1980s. Yet aside from the occasional wry truism: ‘Je suis Bigg Market / I have turned into a replica of Paul Gascoigne’,¹⁷⁶ the success

¹⁷¹ ‘Hands Winging in the Open Wind’, Archive: BM: 1/19/2.

¹⁷² ‘I Looked Down on A Child Today’, *Wolf Tongue*, p. 314.

¹⁷³ ‘Our Mutual Scarlet Boulevard’, *Boulevard*, p. 65.

¹⁷⁴ ‘Their Hearts Should be Telling Them’, Archive: BM: 1/17/1. Other examples of urban description in MacSweeney’s late work may be thematically linked to the ‘Bigg Market’, although they remain unspecific. These include the apocalyptic: ‘squat & cock Yr legs in denim pissfilled doorways / When Sleet Comes Down / on Plastik Spastic Oxfam Tin / and skyblue pandas burn in the fury urban wind’ (‘Jury Vet: Durham Castle ensuite’, Archive: BM: 1/10/1), ‘the now completely forbidden streets / where we step right over the glue and flung bad chips and curry sauce and puke up later’, (My Former Darling Country Wrong or Wrong’, *Postcards*), ‘and the ultimate / T-shirt slogan / of never ending / designer vomit lager / creaming your / Taiwan shoes’ (‘Just Wash & Go’, Archive: BM: 1/17/1).

¹⁷⁵ ‘Derision: Right on Time’, Archive: BM: 1/17/1.

¹⁷⁶ ‘I’m Waiting Forever’, *Horses*, p. 37.

and dynamism of MacSweeney's later Bigg Market – as opposed to the sardonically rendered depravity of Harrison's or Herbert's in their respective 'Passer' and 'Toon' – derives from his sympathetic native perspective.¹⁷⁷ This collusive outlook enables him to share in the revels ('O howay honey I'll take you doon the Bigg Market / Where your clip-clops and groovy stockings')¹⁷⁸ whilst nullifying traditional prejudices with his ironic syntactical constructions: 'It's Saturday, Pearl darling, it's the Bigg Market experience / It's the white cotton clothes. It's less clothes off the colder it gets.'¹⁷⁹ The sheer joviality of MacSweeney's appraisals hinges on a mischievous – and typically 'Geordie' – sense of the absurd which causes him to outrageously personify the area in the guise of a nationally recognisable but locally created *Viz* character ('the Bigg Market up the road on the A1 heaved like a crazed woman')¹⁸⁰ and compare the object of his affections to its questionable culinary delights: 'Marghareta you're as bonny as any Bigg Market pizza / I love your pineapple and ham deep fried curves'.¹⁸¹

The city's modern gastronomic variety is also observed in 'Terrible Changes'. It is a poem whose seemingly incidental references to the French-appellated 'Bourgognes' (followed up with 'The Duke', both a Newcastle pub and a pointed allusion to the sovereign province of Burgundy), to 'Napoli Salami', 'Fujiyama for sushi and beef', the Anglo-Italian 'Pizzaland' and 'Turks Head here we come!', convey a consciously local take on 'multi-culture', but one which even so challenges both narrow concepts of the city's attitude towards diversity, and modern city planners' artificial attempts to introduce more 'culture' into the metropolis. The use of Fenwick's department store as a leitmotif in *Horses* has similar implications: exhibiting MacSweeney's confidence in the literary use of a resonant local landmark and adding rich detail to his lyrics. Typically however, the poet eschews any grand implications pertaining to

¹⁷⁷ Tony Harrison, *Laureate's Block* (London: Penguin Books, 2000), pp. 65-68, W. N. Herbert, *The Big Bumper Book of Troy* (Tarset: Bloodaxe Books, 2002), p. 25.

¹⁷⁸ 'Terrible Changes', *Horses*, p. 23.

¹⁷⁹ 'Pearl Standing Alone in Sparty Moonlight', *False Lapwing*.

¹⁸⁰ 'The Man who walks', *Horses*, p. 76.

¹⁸¹ 'Horses in Boiling Blood or The Fenwick's Third-Floor Hair-do', *Horses*, p. 39.

this retailer's iconic status to focus instead on some more personal specifics: its region-wide reputation for quality women's underwear, its 'exotic' delicatessen, and 'special occasion' hairdressing department, all of which are laden in his work with notions of opulence, beauty and sexuality designed to subvert outdated perceptions of Newcastle. In 'Terrible Changes' MacSweeney implies that to shop within this Mecca brings both luxury and solace: 'I'll buy it while you drift elegantly to the food department [...] Fenwick's deli is the best in town'.¹⁸² Elsewhere he fetishistically suggests that the very nature of the lingerie purchased there can enhance the appeal of its wearer: 'Like a white silk Northumberland Street Fenwick bra that you / unhook / There isn't a moment like it / I LOVE IT';¹⁸³ 'the white Fenwick knickers / are certainly an attraction'.¹⁸⁴ Yet as in the best of the *Horses* lyrics, this redolent Geordie landmark and export is most effectively employed as a familiar point of origin through which to access his wider themes, and in 'Fancy Nancy', MacSweeney uses Fenwick's couture to combine diverse international loci: 'What a smashing Fenwick skirt / It's a frock fit for a democratic princess [...] silk from mysterious Japon' and extend the ultimate *Horses* conceit of fusing Newcastle with Paris in: 'Hand-made and trimmed with Chantilly lace'.¹⁸⁵

Perhaps the main achievement of MacSweeney's delineations of modern Newcastle is the appealing colloquial familiarity with which he encapsulates the local mind-set of resolute frivolity in the face of adversity, whether incarnate in the idiomatic and location specific 'Come on honeybunch I'll buy you a new bra in Fenwick's'¹⁸⁶ or in the philosophical 'Just look at the bee / don't think of the future'.¹⁸⁷ The *Horses* poem 'Terrible Changes' which is 'translated' from Apollinaire's taut lyric 'Mutation', exemplifies both this outlook and the poet's mature poise in using it as a thematic device which he projects outwards from the local

¹⁸² 'Terrible Changes', *Horses*, p. 23.

¹⁸³ 'At the Hoppings', *Horses*, p. 51.

¹⁸⁴ 'I Love You But No', *Horses*, p. 58.

¹⁸⁵ 'Fancy Nancy', *Horses*, p. 72.

¹⁸⁶ 'Terrible Changes', *Horses*, p. 23.

¹⁸⁷ 'Ode to Snowe', *Horses*, p. 26.

to discover parallels in other situations and motifs. Here, Apollinaire's line 'Une femme qui pleurait' becomes MacSweeney's 'A woman bleats & cries in the night She has lost her bloke',¹⁸⁸ thus depicting a drunken separation which is used as the basis for a dialectically rendered consideration of ineffable loss, solitude and the gamut of human responses to such: 'I'll take you out in white courts from Next doon the Toon', 'There's nowt we can do about it flower The wheel must crush lead'. The French poet's 'Des soldates qui passaient' become an instance of the perilous proletariat exploitation which underlies MacSweeney's concept of Newcastle and the North East: 'Killhope Wheel by the recovery farmhouse where the medics wait for work', 'Our trenches were lit up by the brightness of shells'. The inevitability of suffering and death ('Les tranchées qui blanchissaient [...] Des obus qui petaient') and the levels of human suffering epitomised by post-industrial North Eastern subsistence and the horror of WWI ('shells destroying real men / Can you imagine only one arm at the age of 24') are countered with the working-class Geordie propensity to obliterate adversity by means of sex, company and inebriation: 'It's the Quayside for us / Tuxedo Royale'.¹⁸⁹ MacSweeney's equation of Geordie revellers with Apollinaire's soldiers may appear negative, yet his role as a character in the piece and its jubilant ending ('My love is saved forever') turns it into a pure endorsement of a localised form of *carpe diem*, delivered without judgement.

MacSweeney's literary Newcastle can seem retrospective. The poet's desire to imbue his city with a fitting sense of its history caused him to trawl the past for tangible details, local figures and archaic voices to enrich its portrayal: 'I thought you said god was on wor side / he is man / he is / well ah wish the buggah would tell the owners'.¹⁹⁰ He chose particulars which denoted the city's endurance and illustrated its upheavals; placed an emphasis on industrial

¹⁸⁸ 'Mutation' from *Calligrammes*, p. 164, 'Terrible Changes' from *Horses*, p. 23, respectively.

¹⁸⁹ *Horses*; p. 23. In *Danziger's Britain*, the author observes how: 'Local people take to the nightlife as wholeheartedly as they support their football team. As darkness descends over Newcastle, thousands upon thousands of people living in colonies of tenements, estates and university campuses all over the city and beyond, head for the Toon's pubs and clubs along the streets from the Bigg Market or 'Gazza Strip' to the Quayside. They come in taxis and by the minibus load to drink and forget their dull jobs, if they have one, and party like there is no tomorrow' (p. 84).

¹⁹⁰ *Black Torch*, Archive: BM 1/14/8, p. 57.

iconography which ensured that Newcastle's past was never laid to rest, and continually evoked the seminal landscapes of his youth: 'a mirror in the bathroom of the Hotel Armstrong / Which reminds me of Tyneside and Vickers', 'Club A Gogo in Percy Street in Newcastle / And stand there three feet from Muddy Waters and Burdon / singing She's 14 Years Old'.¹⁹¹ Yet the poet's journalistic nous and insatiable fascination with 'whatever looked interesting at the time' ensured that he remained a responsive city chronicler¹⁹² and his mature work was capable of achieving a motivic equilibrium which revealed his 'retrospective' imagery not as jaded nostalgia, but as one composite element of his multi-dimensional locale. The sense of wholeness, of a city open to its past, present and future which emerged in *Horses* and in other late work, allowed such elements to coexist, and in his final collection MacSweeney created an overwhelmingly affirmative image of his native Newcastle which was also highly personal. For in many crucial respects, in his acerbic attitude towards the city's administrators, in his decision to prioritise certain facets whilst sidelining others, and in his wholesale identification with Newcastle's myriad traumas and triumphs, MacSweeney's city was ultimately a private apparition. The extent to which it was so will be discussed in the final chapter of this study.

¹⁹¹ 'Pearl Standing Alone In Sparty Moonlight', *False Lapwing*.

¹⁹² Nicholas Johnson, 'Barry MacSweeney: An Appreciation'.

Chapter Six: From: ‘Dog Leap Stairs / where burns / the groin / of my intent’ to ‘Je suis Bigg Market / I have turned into a replica of Paul Gascoigne’. The Poet and His City: A Subjective Perspective.

Barry MacSweeney’s ‘Newcastle’ as a metamorphosing construct within his work is a highly personal, biographically influenced conception of a city with which he felt an instinctive but enduringly complex connection.¹ Having previously addressed several of the socio-political concerns that influenced its portrayal, I shall now consider how the poet’s own personal trajectory shaped the way in which he both represented, and significantly used the location as a symbol within his verse. I will explore those individualising impetuses: his attitude towards his ‘Geordie’ identity, his adolescent embroilment in Newcastle’s post-war upheavals, the way he perceived relationships conducted against the urban backdrop, his versification of his native dialect, his familial links to Newcastle and other such concerns, that were imperative to which aspects of the city he addressed and which he just as crucially ignored. As well as examining the deep-seated affiliations that repeatedly impelled him to inscribe himself in direct relation to Newcastle, and so create it as a distinct phenomenon in his verse.

MacSweeney’s personal affinity with his native metropolis may primarily be garnered from the way in which he inscribes himself in relation to the city’s infrastructure (‘Your blue eyeshadow lured me / At 3, down by Coldstream Road’),² and particularly amidst its most ancient architecture: ‘I was in Back Stowell Street’.³ This trait denotes his concern with exalting the historically resonant (and coincidentally visually attractive) aspects of the city’s configuration whilst connecting him to its basic identity: ‘I look forward to our lunchtime coffee in Blackfriars.’⁴ On several occasions he creates an impression of his longstanding

¹ Title quotations are from ‘Song’, *The Boy*, p. 38 and ‘I’m Waiting Forever’, *Horses*, p. 37 respectively.

² ‘Letter to Hollywood’, Archive: BM: 2/10/1 (1998).

³ ‘Flashboard Dashboard’, Archive: BM: 1/20/1.

⁴ ‘I’m Waiting Forever’, *Horses*, p. 37.

(even ubiquitous) connection to the city by using the conduit of his experience to fuse past and present imagery: ‘all these houses / were fields and cowlands’,⁵ ‘It’s the Bigg Market [...] It’s the Club A Gogo’.⁶ He also implies his participatory role by inscribing both his own activity and the movements of others amid the civic hub: ‘pedestrians make their way down Moseley Street’, ‘walking past the GREEN MARKET’,⁷ ‘not to jump into / the Tyne’, ‘whipped in by easterlies’, ‘flung onto the West Road’, ‘I stepped down’, ‘We’ll stagger down Dean Street’, ‘drift elegantly to the food department’, ‘Here we go’, ‘heading from Haymarket to Monument’.⁸ Yet within such demarcations, as in much of his work, a paradox exists. For alongside these notions of fluidity and involvement there exist pangs of retrospection and an awareness of his isolation within and subjugation by the urban milieu. These feelings are embodied in *Horses* in his evocations of the iconography-laden landscape of his youth: ‘a bairn / And I stalked the back lanes of Walker / opposite the Neptune Naval Yard’,⁹ and in the solitariness of the line: ‘I stood alone in the Groat Market.’¹⁰

The dialectic in evidence here and that which persistently tempered MacSweeney’s attitude towards his native city is broodingly foreshadowed in his teenage ‘autobiography’ where he conveys his frustration at being intimately connected to the rigid urban environment: ‘The city gave words a harshness, like the steel or coal [...] I was always too involved’. He declares a somewhat contrived preference for the autonomy of the pastoral setting (‘I would flit off to [a] little stone cottage on the fells and fish for trout’) and yet grudgingly, but inevitably, ends up back in the city: ‘Nobody returns in glory [...] and this is June, 1968,

⁵ ‘On the Gap Left after Leaving’, *The Boy*, p. 6.

⁶ ‘Pearl Standing Alone in Sparty Moonlight’, *False Lapwing*. Each of these social hubs is synonymous with a particular era of the city’s twentieth century history.

⁷ ‘After Breakfast (with Peter) Costing 5/6d’, *The Boy*, p. 49.

⁸ ‘To Lyn at Work’, *The Boy*, p. 2, ‘After Breakfast (with Peter) Costing 5/6d’, *The Boy*, p. 49, ‘Death go Get Yr Shoes Repaired & Mend Yr Icey Hat’, *The Boy*, p. 50, ‘Shaking Minds with Robespierre’, *Memos*, p. 17, ‘Don’t Leave Me’, *Wolf Tongue*, p. 300, ‘I Looked Down On a Child Today’, *Wolf Tongue*, p. 314, ‘Terrible changes’, *Horses*, p. 23, ‘Six’, *Horses*, p. 25, respectively.

⁹ ‘Petition to the Jesus Christ Almighty’, *Horses*, p. 55.

¹⁰ ‘I Love You But No’, *Horses*, p. 57.

Newcastle'.¹¹ This tension between the stifling blue-collar metropolis and the exterior, idealised locale; between identification with the familiar scenery and resentment at its decay; between the desire to escape and the draw to return occurs repeatedly in his work: 'my own high Newcastle-upon-Tyne and my tumblestones'.¹² It is a conflict often expressed in paradoxical sentence structures that articulate a fierce indigenusness and yet attempt to undermine it. In 'For the honour of things, undone' MacSweeney describes a journey 'home' ('from Essex out, / 300 miles / by diesel / through Yorkshire') only to deaden the emotion of return whilst still insisting upon his connection to the place: 'feeling numb is easy here / on my pawing ground',¹³ whilst in 'Strap Down in Snowville' he obscures any specific locational allegiance by synthesising rural and urban signifiers: '*Lets hear it for the fratchy fractured Geordie ploughboy / playboy*'.¹⁴ In *Ranter* he ascribes his alias the title 'Man of Kent' (an obscure reference to a nineteenth century reformist weekly) before adding 'Tyneside',¹⁵ and in 'Pasolini Demon Memo' conjures Newcastle's Westgate 'Hill' biker community in 'He rides into town on a Vincent Black Shadow' only to share his domain with the incomer whose foe is fused with his own: 'My territory, his territory [...] let's kick some Mackem Pharisee'.¹⁶

The tensions implicit in MacSweeney's self-association with the city also exist in his use of North East images and locations as simile. For just as the proliferation of named places in his manuscripts indicates the omnipresence of the region in the poet's psyche, so his use of its iconic motifs to describe both his own and other characters' physical and psychological states provides further clues as to the nature of his regional consciousness. In his mid-late work this mode is often employed to establish a dismal parallel between the poet's own

¹¹ 'The autobiography of Barry MacSweeney', *The Boy*.

¹² 'False Lapwing' (Draft Version), Archive: BM: 2/10/2 (Oct 1998).

¹³ *Boulevard*, p. 30.

¹⁴ *Demons*, p. 86. In Bill Griffiths' *A Dictionary of North East Dialect* (Newcastle upon Tyne: University of Northumbria Press, 2004) 'fratchy' (irritable, quarrelsome) is specifically identified as 'imported from Tyneside' (p. 59), and although 'Geordie' and 'playboy' are also specifically urban, 'ploughboy' and the next section: '*collapsed and weeping in his bent furrow*' are definitively rural.

¹⁵ *Ranter*, p. 6.

¹⁶ *Demons*, p. 54.

physical traumas and the disintegration of the city's engineering backbone. Envisioning each as once brilliant, revolutionary entities now ravaged by time and circumstance: 'I shook like a broken Elswick rivet, a shattered / magnet in the coil of a brilliant engine, my very / Northern spirit', their basic working-class foundations eclipsed and rendered inert: 'alone with my books, a union man, a left wing man / with a right foot on the field of play, and shattered rivets'.¹⁷ Similarly stark and privately relevant local metaphor is also used for negative effect elsewhere in his work, in 'I am Lucifer' where the poet becomes the devil inflicting illness on a poor quarter of the city ('I am tonsillitis at the bad end of Newcastle')¹⁸ and in 'Daddy Wants to Murder Me' where he couches a desperate attempt to repair his relationship with his father in the terms of a locally resonant but largely outmoded manufacturing process:

and after angry handshakes and solitary exchanges
at the closure of another
worldwide great shipyard that I might in my poetic
unappreciated nightmare about you, daddy, ask for
flux to weld my utterly broken heart to yours.¹⁹

Finally, in the poem 'When The Lights Went Out A Cheer Rose In The Air', MacSweeney presents a desolate image when in drugged confusion he mistakes his hospital apparatus for a feature of the known landscape: 'I glanced through letter-box eyes at 6'o clock / thinking the slightly waving drip an Armstrong strut / wind hammering through it or sweetly whistled'.²⁰

Alongside these despondent conjunctions, and increasingly evident in his late work exist some more positive personal appropriations of local iconography. In 'John Bunyan To

¹⁷ 'When The Lights Went Out A Cheer Rose In The Air', *Wolf Tongue*, pp. 301-2.

¹⁸ *Postcards*.

¹⁹ *Demons*, pp. 46-47.

²⁰ *Wolf Tongue*, p. 301. Although this is clearly a local reference to William Armstrong's development of the hydraulic machinery which powered Newcastle's swing bridge that bears his name, it is also one of MacSweeney's amalgamative conceits, for where 'wind hammering through it' refers to the bridge, 'or sweetly whistled' clearly evokes Louis Armstrong's recordings, 'Sugar Foot Strut' and 'Oriental Strut'.

Johnny Rotten' MacSweeney uses the phrase 'right as a River Tyne rivet' to suggest a character's integrity, a syntactical construction which is not only delightfully rhythmical but which evokes the poet's own idiomatic identity and links himself and his protagonist 'Tom' directly with the city's proud industrial legacy.²¹ In the *Horses* poem 'Victory Over Darkness & The Sunne' MacSweeney imagines himself as the city's very ether: 'I am the sky over Greys Monument / I am the sky beyond the Haymarket and beyond that [...] My faithful voice in the darkness of Denton Burn'.²² Several other lyrics in this collection exploit the emotional subtext of the Fenwick department store, recalling the shop's anterior display, not in its infamous capacity as an object of seasonal childhood wonder, but as a metaphor for various emotional states. As an analogy for the youthful fervour of socio-political activism:

We used to organise trade unions and organise the universe

We stood tall upon the globe and really felt it was ours only

We thought we were laying out Fenwick's window

And all of the farmers of Hexham would be queuing up for the sale

They would be standing there in their boots dumb with amazement

And the dogs of Carliol Square would be running them ragged.²³

It is also used to explicate the emotion experienced on reunification with a lover, structurally enhanced by the suggestion of an almost audible discharge of breath:

What a relief it will be a real Fenwick's window to hug you.²⁴

In *Horses*, this renewed celebration of local motifs combined with MacSweeney's natural replication of his Geordie dialect, conjures an ingenuous sense of his native persona: 'We said

²¹ 'John Bunyan To Johnny Rotten', *Demons*, p. 105.

²² *Horses*, p. 28.

²³ 'The Illegal 2CV', *Horses*, p. 43.

²⁴ 'Victory Over Darkness & the Sunne', *Horses*, p. 29.

ta-ra to Blackfriars',²⁵ 'Our Katie gives me two daises picked from Whitbeck Road'.²⁶ Yet even amid the most confident, warmly inclusive and personal of his city portraits, an impression of conflict remains in the authorial denial: 'I saw this morning a beautiful street whose name I don't remember / it was Northumberland Street, Newcastle-upon-Tyne / A city I have never been to'.²⁷

MacSweeney's inscription of his own identity in direct relation to his literary city was continually fraught with tension. At points his munificent desire for other locales drew him away from Newcastle, and yet his relationship with it also developed into something of a reciprocal descriptive system which refracted images from man to city and back again, even hinting at the twinning of their individual trajectories: 'I am going to be a liar again and be a town to myself / Eventually I'll be a city and a citadel. Newcastle'.²⁸ This latter stance is not so surprising if we consider that the poet often used his 'own marginalisation from the official poetry scene' to seek 'counterpoint[s] in other exclusions, other suppressions',²⁹ searches which inevitably, crucially and repeatedly found expression in the social history of his native city: 'They cannit tell / yi nowt, sleepless and ashamed / for selling bonny Newcastle / for what ? – a handful of / brass tokens'.³⁰ In Newcastle's existence at the edge of British culture he was provided with an analogy for his own exclusions and adopted the demeanour of the defensive and unpredictable underdog or even 'lone wolf' to unite his character with that of the city: 'we do not ask for high-vised help. / Our indifference is genuine'.³¹ This perspective is evinced in conscious yokes which affectionately evoke the relation: 'Tyneside [...] swivel

²⁵ 'The Illegal 2CV', *Horses*, pp. 42-43. The genuineness of MacSweeney's replication of the Geordie dialect is brought into significant relief when compared with his attempts to versify other accents, such as in 'The slow lifting of unwanted garments: Marxist Song' where 'the night sky is so very and utterly cruel, / when it is not filled with love by your mum, so it is' comes across as a clumsy aping of the Irish vernacular (BM 1/19/1) and in a version of *Ranter* where he phonetically renders a Cockney twang in: 'Dartford Tunnel / HOME / London, sarfeast / Eltham Blackheath' in a manner which appears entirely contrived (BM: 1/14/4).

²⁶ 'Victory Over Darkness & the Sunne', *Horses*, p. 28.

²⁷ 'Feast of Fashion Burning Down Zone', *Horses*, p. 17.

²⁸ 'Lazy Susan's Blockbusters': Archive: BM: 1/19/3.

²⁹ John Sears, 'Out of Control'.

³⁰ 'Geordieus Unbound', Archive: BM: 2/2.

³¹ 'But This is Newcastle', Archive: BM: 1/17/1

swagger hips all-life man!’,³² ‘Tyneside black swagger strides’, ‘Tyneside smile’,³³ ‘Geordie boy’.³⁴ Whilst this instinctive self-situating is also apparent in numerous manuscripts poems that are inscribed not just with the date of their composition but with the location: ‘Looking Down from the West Window’: Sept 27 93 Newcastle’, ‘Pearl Says’: Septembre 18, 1993, Newcastle’. ‘No Such Thing’: Aou, 15, 1993, Newcastle’.³⁵

MacSweeney’s Autobiographical City

Newcastle’s lyric significance for MacSweeney was complicated from an early stage by the dichotomy inherent in his line ‘snowy hills / between the Allen and Tyne’,³⁶ or the enduring notion in his poetry of at least two separate designations of ‘home’. The rural idyll of Sparty Lea is continually evoked as an antidote to the dangerous yet unavoidable vices of Newcastle: ‘my fingers like me are face down in the heart of the city / My eyelids broken and lips bleeding I stagger home Streets dead / Longing for the sharp winds’.³⁷ Yet in a paradoxical and almost involuntary strain, an awareness of his urban origins relentlessly emerges as an equally powerful emotional impetus which counteracts the draw of his bucolic haven: ‘You returned from Sparty to the city / Most utterly regrettable’.³⁸ Although many of his published poems concern themselves with eulogising Sparty Lea, his manuscripts achieve the converse in their figurative re-visitations to the visual iconography of Newcastle’s industrial history: ‘Workers’ scarves, marrah’s hankies, rusty railings / and sliced tight light / in empty Tyne yards’.³⁹ He thereby exposes himself as a concerned and even grudgingly prideful internal participant ‘Nissen hut dole draughts / blast the labourer’s poet’,⁴⁰ and one sporadically prone

³² ‘Good Times Gone Truly Bad’, Archive: BM: 1/19/2

³³ ‘Six o’clock’, Archive: BM 1/20/1

³⁴ ‘Ploughmen Dig My Earth’ [II], Archive: 1/19/3

³⁵ Archive: BM: 1/18

³⁶ ‘Song’, *The Boy*, p. 38.

³⁷ ‘Victory Over Darkness & The Sunne’, *Horses*; p. 29.

³⁸ ‘Dead Man Walking’, Archive: BM 1/20/1 (*Zero Hero* drafts, 1996).

³⁹ Untitled poem, Archive: BM1/20/1.

⁴⁰ Untitled poem, Archive: BM 1/4/4.

even to direct affirmations of his identity: ‘being a Geordie boy listed with wanted lust’,⁴¹ ‘I try my best, Geordie’.⁴² Yet this particular dialectic is not without its North East precedents. For, like Linda France who recalls her instinctive shock at the loss of the familiar (‘South, where it never snowed’)⁴³ or George Charlton whose divesture from a never fully escapable native consciousness is explored in poems including ‘A Return to Newcastle’: ‘I am up from the South and back to it [...] A frog-prince back, too thirsty for release’,⁴⁴ MacSweeney’s use of such motifs registers a sense of the inescapable about his connection the city.

In several poems the citation of ‘home’ in MacSweeney’s work is complicated further by its concurrent use in both the provincial (‘home’ meaning Newcastle) and domestic (‘home’ meaning dwelling) sense, both of which are variously and distinctly equated with notions of serious aggression. In some cases, these negative descriptions are largely familial narrative, recalling early experiences of illness (both his brother’s Bronchitis and the industrial disease of a neighbour: ‘coughs duets with the man / next-door until the sun comes up / when they sling mucus balls / at sparrows’),⁴⁵ the hardships of a northern working-class existence (‘me mam is a / stooping figure shovelling coal from / the path into the cellar & she / worries’),⁴⁶ and later, recriminations incurred as a consequence of the poet’s alcoholism which are topographically specific in occurring in and around the family abode: ‘snow was crisp on the lawn at / dawn as I got up & popped the cork [...] Hey how do you do it smelling / of drink this early?’,⁴⁷ ‘when berated at the crossroads between Ashleigh Road and The / Drive by your so-called mother and being branded evil in front of neighbours / At nine-thirty

⁴¹ ‘Ploughmen Dig My Earth’ [II], Archive; BM: 1/19/3.

⁴² ‘Lazy Susan’s blockbusters’, BM: 1/19/3.

⁴³ ‘North and South’, *Red*, p. 29.

⁴⁴ *Ten North-East Poets*, ed. by Neil Astley (Newcastle upon Tyne: Bloodaxe Books, 1980), p. 34.

⁴⁵ ‘Song: Bronchitis (for Paul)’, *The Boy*, p. 11.

⁴⁶ ‘To Me Mam, Somewhere To The North Of This Shit’, *The Boy*, p. 54.

⁴⁷ ‘When Paul Woke Up Today’, *The Boy*, p. 48.

in the morning'.⁴⁸ That such personal matter should find a poetic foil in the region's own violent past is inevitable; that MacSweeney managed to use the conceit to imbue both with a sense of tragic grandeur is perhaps even more so. From a line which fuses local clan history with his own childhood experience of patriarchal assault ('Born under family blows / you will always wear / the warrior's ring'),⁴⁹ to a dialect suggestion of the furtherance of brutality in adult life ('home [where violence is & was]. Yem is where / people die')⁵⁰ and a description of his Newcastle address couched in images of brutal archaic warfare in keeping with his alias in these poems as Pearl's 'Prince', the poet pursues his theme: 'from the edge of the roaring bypass, from / the home of the broken bottle and fiery / battleground of the sieged estate'.⁵¹

In addition to such early formed identifications between 'home' and emotional trauma, the poet's Newcastle residence in adulthood was also fraught with negative associations in that he frequently (and self-confessedly) used it as a bolt-hole in which to fulfil his addiction: 'Every home these days should have a medicine cupboard'.⁵² He also recognised the dangers of such solitude and feared that he may well die there as a direct or indirect consequence of his habit: 'I'm flat out loaded / If the logs fall from the fire / I'll burn to death'.⁵³ At several points MacSweeney draws direct associations between the stagnant, addiction-fuelling evils of city living and the purifying qualities of the 'Sparty locale', purposely asserting his literary context with: 'lathed and lathered with port-soaked Baudelaire gingercake / alone as nitrates usher from the gargoyle's twisted seizure face [...] Yet there's another side to Sweeno, the

⁴⁸ 'Cold Mountain Ode', *Horses*, p. 34. Although in *Poetry Information* MacSweeney's recollections are fairly innocuous – 'we got one of yer actual council houses [...] we'd never had it so good', 'I was a moody kid, used to get spanked a lot' (p. 27), his familial situation as mythologized within the poetry is rather more violent.

⁴⁹ *Ranter*, p. 40.

⁵⁰ 'Colonel B', *Tempers*, p. 208.

⁵¹ 'No Such Thing', *Demons*, p. 15. This description is of MacSweeney's home beside the A1 motorway that was built as a city bypass, and on an outlying estate, which by the addition of 'sieged' he imbues with archaic as well as 50s/60s architectural reference.

⁵² 'Memos: Dropzone Vision', Archive: BM: 1/17/1. In 'Message in a Bottle' Gordon Burn writes: 'When he was drinking, he disappeared to his lair in Newcastle and stayed there until he wanted to go sober again. It broke down into a pattern of roughly two months in each place'.

⁵³ 'I Don't Walk The Line All of The Time', *Horses*, p. 53. Also: 'central heating left on for days and nights / by the drunken devil who lives here / listening to Blind Willie Johnson [no T]' ('Lucifer', *Postcards*). The use of 'no T' is not only a self-allusive reference to 'Colonel B': ['JOHNSTON']), but suggests the poet's addiction: a lack of appetite and 'no tonic' i.e. straight gin or no remedy.

man with eyes of borage blue / the man high up in the heather hills'.⁵⁴ This demonization of the urban is also self-enabling, allowing the poet almost a licence to drink when residing in Newcastle in order to escape from the fantasised horrors of modern city existence: 'leaves are falling like poems / onto the pages of the pavements / War is everywhere [...] and the conspiracies never cease'.⁵⁵ In *Demons*, MacSweeney's urban habits and haunts are necessarily dictated by his drinking, from point of purchase ('pushing open the off-licence door') and means of travel ('on the / badly-lit late bus going home')⁵⁶ to eventual rescue: 'The 999 call – again. / My quivering man laid under a blue light / empty bottles left behind'.⁵⁷ His view of the city is often limited, comprising little more than glimpses of peripheral life momentarily refracted through his drinking vessel: 'Glass glints purchase sunlight as birds and long-haul / planes fly through'.⁵⁸ The experience of actual physical collapse in Newcastle leads him to describe his drunken self in direct relation to the city streets in which he falls: 'gutter treasurer & curled up counter of cobblestones',⁵⁹ 'I convulse and fit and my hands sleep in the street / until children find me',⁶⁰ 'Hell is the pavement against my shit face',⁶¹ whilst this negligent, purposeless relationship with the town and its populace is indicative of his own broader social failure: 'Now that I have gone awry crooked askew lopsided off-centre unsatisfactory / And hammer the hardmetal of the streets without completing my various responsibilities'.⁶²

I love the absolute compost heap and I love the dark

⁵⁴ 'Sweeno, Sweeno', *Demons*, p. 88.

⁵⁵ 'I Don't Walk The Line All of The Time', *Horses*, p. 53.

⁵⁶ 'Daddy Wants To Murder Me', *Demons*, p. 47.

⁵⁷ 'We Offer You One Third Off Plenitude', *Demons*, p. 43. Despite MacSweeney's references to being drunk in the street, his allusions to Newcastle pubs (in contrast with those of Bob Cooper, for instance) are few, and rarely specific. One of the only named examples exists in Mary Bell, with: 'hold me bright light / and in the Cradlewell, hold me, advocate, tight, tight, tight'. ([6], Archive: BM: 2/9/1).

⁵⁸ 'Sweeno, Sweeno', *Demons*, p. 92.

⁵⁹ *Ibid*, p. 88.

⁶⁰ 'Victory Over Darkness & the Sunne', *Horses*, p. 29

⁶¹ 'Free Pet With Every Cage', *Demons*, p. 40.

⁶² 'All of Your Sinnes Will be Known Always And Never Forgiven', *Horses*, p. 54. The poem continues: 'Except spitting in the gutter at the former headmaster who tried to pederast me', signalling another negative Newcastle association for the poet.

dreaded by others who do not spend their lives as poets⁶³

The effect of MacSweeney's drinking 'demons' on his later Newcastle cityscapes was significant, as he struggled with an authority that tormented his consciousness in a manner akin to Olson's assertion in 'An Ode to Nativity': 'I / have company / in the night [...] when to walk is so difficult / when the divine tempter also walks / renewing his offer'.⁶⁴ During this period his work is plagued by hallucinations and is notable for its lessened regional timbre: 'His poetry ignored the miners' strike because he no longer wrote it'.⁶⁵ His addiction, and his uncompromising attitude towards his literary vocation, also ensures that his mature portrayals of Newcastle are habitually nocturnal: echoing a connection between verse and darkness that Cole Swenson identifies in his article 'Poetry City', stating: 'Poetry is an inherently nocturnal medium, comfortable with shadows, shadowy explanations and shadowy emotions. Keats's negative capability keeps its balance in the dark world of potential rather than the daylight world of the actual'.⁶⁶ In both *Demons* and *Postcards* this large-scale avoidance of reality, maintained partly through alcohol used to mask a self-confessed 'Fear of the unknown in the real world', leads to MacSweeney's creation of a shadowy, often deformed ('Stasis lock-ups / underneath the fallen arches / in Legless Lonnen')⁶⁷ and rarely named Newcastle: 'Starlings / thrash the sky at dawn in feathered / shoals, quitting nightrest rooftop / cat-free safety of the city centre Odeon'.⁶⁸ His sporadic perambulations, conducted outside the usual waking hours of the populace, allow him to capture the city at its normally unrecorded moments:

Slit of light across the sky above the city: 7am:

⁶³ 'My Mother Was A Tree Branch', Archive: BM: 2/10/3.

⁶⁴ *Charles Olson Reading at Berkeley*, p. 9.

⁶⁵ Nicholas Johnson; 'Barry MacSweeney: An Appreciation'.

⁶⁶ In 'Poetry City', Cole Swenson notes: 'Urban obscurity can be caused by corners, crowds, passing traffic, or nighttime – which is as occupied as day. Poetry's obscurities are ambiguity, insinuation, ellipsis, but also darkness – that of the unlit regions beyond logic and reason, regions of impulse and emotion.'

⁶⁷ 'Buying Christmas Wrapping Paper On January 12', *Demons*, p. 41.

⁶⁸ 'Demons in My Pocket', *Demons*, p. 58.

raining and me wandering.⁶⁹

I walked into the streets at seven minutes past three this morning

two glasses brimfilled with dry white wine

one each hand drank them both upon the landscaped pitheap

spring merle madness

it was pourplutting with rain.⁷⁰

I wear punk pair of shattered kecks.

There is no me. Denton Burn all these years throned in frost.

4am AIM roaring trucks blinding rain chill.⁷¹

MacSweeney's perception of his own private sexual relationships in connection with the urban milieu is a topic interlinked with his drinking activities, one fraught with tensions between known and transient females that echo those of preceding male city poetry, but one which is also individualised. His early recollections of beloved women amidst the Newcastle environment are often extremely compassionate and even afforded transfiguring properties, as when in *The Boy* he infers the effects of his amour on the surrounding landscape: 'i kissed you for the first time in the / middle of the Swing Bridge in [...] order to spread the loveliness over as / much ground as possible'.⁷² His contextualisation of such encounters also provides a useful index for his constantly evolving connection with the city, as in earlier collections his affirmative liaisons are conducted amidst youthful haunts: in and around 'the main part of town',⁷³ by the river, markets and 'down the dark / steps in the derelict part of town glowing /

⁶⁹ 'Pearl In the Silver Morning', *Wolf Tongue*, p. 323.

⁷⁰ 'I'm Waiting Forever', *Horses*, p. 37.

⁷¹ 'Mary Bell Sonnets' [57].

⁷² 'Death go Get Yr Shoes Repaired & Mend Yr Icey Hat', *The Boy*, p. 51. A notion mirrored in the *Horses* poem 'Victory Over Darkness & The Sunne': 'Our laughter even when we talk on the telephone spreads like butter / All around the house and the very world' (p. 28).

⁷³ 'Escorted her out', *Boulevard*, pp. 17-18. Although this poem is geographically unspecific (the poet noting that: 'the details are onerous / too extensive to put down / just rather its known / I was escorting her out of the / main street in town'), the date ('Poems 1965 : 1968') makes Newcastle the most likely setting.

with cider',⁷⁴ whilst later affairs are complemented by surroundings reflecting his maturity: 'Your eyes gazing at the Blackfriars pigeons',⁷⁵ 'yr voice past [...] grocery store the motor / way / to this humble bright / & oh so willing nest',⁷⁶ 'lilac suit with its fresh collar / Hair done at Fenwick's'.⁷⁷ In the archive poems 'Meeting' and 'In the City', MacSweeney conceives his emotional history in combination with the city's own by addressing the co-existence of former lovers within a common urban environment and imagining the unease of a chance encounter facilitated by Newcastle's compact central structure: 'Saw one / he'd loved / wrote poems / for / glances exchanged / by dairy / products'.⁷⁸ Here, the unusually narrative construction captures MacSweeney's existent self both from an emotional standpoint and in correlation with the socio-political climate, underlining the connection between the two:

her shopping-bag
because she is tired
is put down
on the vandalised wall
of the miner's
home
by the number one bus
stop.⁷⁹

His depiction of the liaison, like many of his evocations of Newcastle, is crafted with both tenderness and respect: 'would I / choose you / from the / crowd / of course / I would'.⁸⁰

⁷⁴ 'Death go Get Yr Shoes Repaired & Mend Yr Icey Hat', *The Boy*, pp. 50-1.

⁷⁵ 'Horses or The Fenwicks Third Floor Hair-do', *Horses*, p. 39.

⁷⁶ '2nd Telephone Song', *The Boy*, p. 43.

⁷⁷ '1997', *Horses*, p. 69.

⁷⁸ 'In the City: I', Archive: BM: 1/17/1.

⁷⁹ 'MEETING', Archive: BM: 1/17/1.

⁸⁰ 'In the City: IV', Archive: BM: 1/17/1.

Alongside such agreeable renderings of personal relationships within the city, MacSweeney's work was increasingly preoccupied with the notion of the metropolis as a sexually corruptive arena.⁸¹ His mid-point compositions are rife with images of violently commoditised sexuality set against generic urban backdrops ('kill / your cock / song / Cream the city / gristle piston / inside bone')⁸² and misogynistically depicted metropolitan females ('my averring slut receptionist',⁸³ and 'page three. banner trash'),⁸⁴ which inevitably impact on – and originate from – his observations of Newcastle. In 'STREETERS INTO RED' from *Jury Vet*, the line 'bangled / tits & tots' suggests the North East stereotype of adolescent motherhood and tendency to adorn offspring with jewellery.⁸⁵ In 'Garbled Manifest – No Hellhole Unturned', the poet's 'devil's whore handmaidens' are deliberately emblematic, distorted creations in line with his contextualising reference to 'Bladerunner'. Yet the poem's detail is uncomfortably 'local', both geographically ('Gallowgate') and in its evocation of vicious stereotypes: 'white courts, bursting, roots showing from rhizome heads, / in furious lace and lawn [...] ruby ankle-straps eager for pointless pleasure's / endless diversion'.⁸⁶ In several of the *Horses* poems MacSweeney's urban females are less caustically observed but remain demarcated according to his voyeuristic male perspective, as he entitles one lyric 'The Dollbird/Redblonde' (after Apollinaire's similarly condescending 'La Jolie Rousse') and observes Geordie women on a trajectory through the city whilst avowing their sexual allure: 'Bossbabes heading from Haymarket to Monument / They want them'.⁸⁷ In order to sustain

⁸¹ It should be noted that this representation of the city as a den of iniquity is far milder in relation to his native Newcastle than it is in association with London in his work.

⁸² 'Panther Freckles', *Odes 1971-78*, p. 30.

⁸³ 'Cavalry at Calvary', *Demons*, p. 23.

⁸⁴ 'Colonel B', *Tempers*, p. 209.

⁸⁵ *Tempers*, p. 244.

⁸⁶ 'Garbled Manifest', *Memos*, p. 19. This exaggerated image of Geordie women is not specific but its locative influence is implied in MacSweeney's remark circa 1993: 'there's a whole class of people in Newcastle, in the North East, who wear a uniform [...] The women wear black leather blousons, tight, badly taken-up Levis, or not Levis but denims, no stockings and white court stilettos'. (Interview/conversation with Maggie O'Sullivan, transcribed by Paul Batchelor). Yet even intended as a fantastical mutation of reality, this is a decidedly unpleasant vision.

⁸⁷ 'Six', *Horses*, p. 25. In a draft of the *Horses* poem 'Feast of Fashion Burning Down Zone' the poet admits the bias of his perspective: 'it was Northumberland Street, Newcastle-upon-Tyne / it was filled with women of unusual hue and fantastic attraction / I would say that being a horny male poet on the rebound' (Archive: BM: 2/6). In other poems in this collection females associated with Newcastle are either deliberately symbolic or

his pleasure in such salacious spectatorship however, MacSweeney was increasingly careful to disassociate named lovers from his Newcastle cityscapes, superiorly stating that: ‘my love stakes higher ground’.⁸⁸ So that in the poem ‘I’m Waiting Forever’, he exists ‘Alone’ in the city, drinking in ‘the streets [...] upon the landscaped pitheap’, and yet proclaims his affection through the lexicons of his rural locale ‘But I still love you up here in the great uplands of the north / From Alston to Garrigill’.⁸⁹

In order to disconnect his ‘true’ loves from the city environment, MacSweeney often chooses to depict them in terms of their own native (or residential) spheres as divergent from his own, as in ‘beautiful blonde Jewess Vivienne / from Brick Lane’,⁹⁰ and in the guise of his lover articulating this difference: ‘You the prince / of beck and burn / I watch the Thames’.⁹¹ Consequently, ‘Pearl’ is not only detached from the trappings of urbanite beautification (‘no / lipstick required [...] no / city chemist or salon’)⁹² but her repeated connection to Sparty prefigures a physical and psychological separation from Newcastle: a location she is only permitted to approach through her companion (the poet)’s edited anecdotes: ‘you said Thorne’s, Percy Street, next to what they call a university [...] take me to the bookshops and an art gallery’.⁹³ Another definitive instance of this segregation exists in MacSweeney’s delineation of his mature relationship with the poet Jackie Litherland whom he repeatedly twins in his work with both her native West Midlands (‘I alone singular bombed Coventry she would not spare me’, ‘Oh darling Litherland, my love from middle England’),⁹⁴ and with Durham city where she lived during the pair’s relationship: ‘I can hear your voice from Pity

fused in order to facilitate the ‘collaboration’ with Apollinaire: ‘Gillian Lou Marghareta’ (‘Horses or The Fenwicks Third Floor Hair-do’, *Horses*, p. 39).

⁸⁸ ‘Six’, *Horses*, p. 25.

⁸⁹ *Horses*, p. 37.

⁹⁰ ‘Utterly Lost to Zero in the Demon Memory’, Archive: BM: 1/19/1.

⁹¹ *Ranter*, p. 39.

⁹² ‘No Such Thing’, *Demons*, p. 15. Also: ‘Lipstick, she said, on a slate in the rain, / is a complete nobody to me’, ‘Dark Was The Night And Cold Was The Ground’, *Demons*, p. 25.

⁹³ ‘Pearl’s New Dawn and Silverdew’, Archive: BM: 1/19/1.

⁹⁴ ‘Don’t Leave Me’, *Wolf Tongue*, pp. 296-98.

Me'.⁹⁵ It is a crucial distinction which enables him to distinguish geographically between their temperaments and allows him to - at least lyrically - distance her from his urban lair: 'my Durham doe, my Elvet Swan'.⁹⁶ This trait in MacSweeney's work is as indicative of a jealous isolation of his own identity as of a wish to guard his lovers from association with the debasing urban environment. Yet there is an increasing sense in his later verse of a desire to differentiate between the types of liaison experienced. Those of true and universal passion which are principally divested from association with Newcastle and those of lesser moral quality which embody the baser side of his sexual nature, are a distraction from his 'real' loves and occur specifically amidst the iniquities of the city:

She cleaved her heart
to me and I betrayed her
at 3.27 am in Percy Street
Nine thousand times
Ten Thousand times

After the Club A Gogo
3.28
Give Me Back the Ring

Dark-haired Catherine
I have paid for it

one million times.⁹⁷

⁹⁵ 'In Charge Of The Lads', *Horses*, p. 30.

⁹⁶ 'Lazy Susan's Blockbusters', Archive: BM: 1/19/3.

⁹⁷ 'The double bone in the throat of the street', *Horses*, p. 50. In *The Sphinx in the City: Urban Life, the Control of Disorder, and Women*, Elizabeth Wilson outlines the roles of urban women in literature: 'Woman is present in cities as temptress, as whore, as fallen woman, as lesbian, but also as virtuous womanhood in danger, as heroic womanhood who triumphs over temptation and tribulation. Writers such as Benjamin concentrated upon their own experience of strangeness in the city, their own longings and desires, but many writers more definitely and clearly posed the presence of women as a problem of order, partly because their presence symbolised the promise of sexual adventure. This promise was converted into a general moral and political threat' (Berkley, Los Angeles, Oxford: University of California Press, 1991), p. 6.

Urban Affiliations: MacSweeney the Collusive Geordie

In addition to rendering the city both figuratively and through his own private experiences, MacSweeney also affiliated himself with Newcastle and conjured a sense of its character by emphasising factors which allied his identity with that of the wider collective. One insistent example of this, and of his unapologetic advocacy of Geordie culture is his use of motifs related to Newcastle United Football Club, an iconography so crucial to his sense of self that his team's personnel, despised rivals and score-lines subsist as vestiges of truth in his poems when all else has been obliterated: 'And when I am in my braindead state / forgetting everything except the last Newcastle result'.⁹⁸ The (national) familiarity of United's moniker and club colours, as exploited by W.N. Herbert in 'Toon' ('white as coal [...] black as hard-boiled fog') also ensure that his references need not always be so explicit,⁹⁹ since any twinned use of these colours, or citation of 'magpie' necessarily held the potential to exceed its individual context and serve as an in-house sign for the poet's working-class and collusive Geordie identity. In a draft of 'Himself Bright Starre Northern Within' MacSweeney conveys delight, nostalgia, literary reference and his loss of poetic insight whilst referencing the city via its football team in the lines: 'its all gorgeous black and white' and 'there was a woman in white before my eyes went black'.¹⁰⁰ This pairing exists elsewhere in even closer connection to the urban milieu: 'under the black and white sky',¹⁰¹ 'We watch favourite cities / in decline. / We get the 125 / we leave behind the / black & white. / We marry blondes'¹⁰² and manifests in other contexts to divulge the poet's devotion to the team and to Newcastle itself: 'Hazel, I'm still a black and white beserker'.¹⁰³ In a similar mode it is MacSweeney's laboured use of the broadly denotative 'magpie' which suggests its localised resonance. As it operates in his

⁹⁸ 'I'm Doomed To Love You Forever', *Horses*, p. 52.

⁹⁹ *The Big Bumper Book of Troy*, p. 25.

¹⁰⁰ Archive: BM: 1/19/5. The line follows: 'We stand by the Tyne', making a connection more explicit.

¹⁰¹ 'Hellhound Memo: Terrifying Text Jan 10 1993': Archive: BM: 1/17/1.

¹⁰² 'Revulsion (Torvill and Dean)', Archive: 1/17/1.

¹⁰³ 'Such a Single Starre', Archive: BM: 1/19/3. Also: 'Emily Dickinson – in New England / snow white, and one in 2am night-time black – / Linda France' ('Rages and Larks', Archive: BM: 1/20/1).

work as a literal ornithological description ('make you tea as the magpies puff belly the hospital hill'),¹⁰⁴ as a symbol for chatter, nagging women and thieving obsession ('magpies / stealing shirts / pawning hair / pasting pride'),¹⁰⁵ and as alter ego and emblem for the poet's indigenous urban character: 'You said you were a magpie and would / fly to me',¹⁰⁶ 'Magpie sucking eggs / until you're broken'.¹⁰⁷

It is the frequency of such motifs in MacSweeney's work that betrays their sporting connotations and thus the club's psychological immediacy for him as a source of reference: one which is used to signal his emotional investment: 'My weepy Bar / when Newcastle lost Andy Cole and Kevin Keegan left / and Alan Shearer was injured for almost the whole season',¹⁰⁸ and employed as a private metaphor: 'the directors of my clubs will / always come a cropper'.¹⁰⁹ It is one which is mobilised to express the poet's isolation from those who do not share his passion ('I sat in the back reading the match reports That's fine by me')¹¹⁰ and to imply kinship with those who do: 'lollbonce on black plastic rim / bottle of Hennessy and a Football Pink / 's all I need'.¹¹¹ MacSweeney uses football to signal cultural community by representing the irrepressible Geordie attitude towards Newcastle's main rivals – considered an alien entity although sited less than 15 miles away: 'There was a colour about it, not from here, it must have been Sunderland, / a weird football team of which I have never heard except when planets explain their past doings'.¹¹² In several cases he uses the sport to express his addiction to alcohol, capitalising on the city's synonymy with both motifs as well as his

¹⁰⁴ 'Don't Leave Me', *Wolf Tongue*, p. 296.

¹⁰⁵ *Blackbird*.

¹⁰⁶ 'The Horror', *Demons*, p. 62.

¹⁰⁷ *Ranter*, p. 30.

¹⁰⁸ 'Lucifer', *Postcards*.

¹⁰⁹ 'I'm Doomed To Love You Forever', *Horses*, p. 52. An even more negative parallel occurs in 'Sweeno, Sweeno' when the poet identifies himself with the aggression for which his team's supporters were known in the 1980s and 1990s: 'Sweeno the long cry rising like missile fins from the fans' end' (*Demons*, p. 88).

¹¹⁰ 'The Illegal 2CV', *Horses*, p. 42.

¹¹¹ 'Strap Down In Snowville', *Demons*, p. 85. *Football Pink* was until recently a local reports publication, quickly produced on a Saturday afternoon and sold by vendors in the streets and pubs of Newcastle.

¹¹² *Ibid.* Also: 'I'm not extracting the urine even though you're a Mackem supporter' ('The Heartbroken Starre', *Horses*, p. 31).

experience of them in the punchy song-lyric-style ‘I Don’t Walk The Line All of The Time’ (‘You don’t know fuckall / You don’t know the fall / back from the brink / The journey from the ball / to the endless drinke’)¹¹³ and in the mantra ‘Sweeno Sweeno’: ‘Ten years in the same team Going Nowhere Albion sponsored / not just match days Cellar 5.’¹¹⁴ Yet the poet’s ultimate conceit in this vein is his fusion of the often mutually exclusive art forms of football and poetry. His use of them as interchangeable motifs, united by his passion and by his wish to blur class-conscious distinctions between ‘high’ and ‘low’ culture, constitutes a challenge to both internal and external concepts of static North East consciousness: ‘I would football is poetry / rhyming my feet in composition with the moving ball moving / sweetly’;¹¹⁵ ‘football / is a poetic means’.¹¹⁶

By far the most consistent signifier in MacSweeney’s oeuvre to evoke a sense of his native Newcastle and his own connection to it is his use of dialect and idiom; a consistently integrated facet that varies in usage from the ‘sometimes hilarious’ to the uncompromisingly grim.¹¹⁷ Yet unlike his erstwhile examinations of native lingo, the formal declarations of its seminally violent history (‘the poetry of battle / blood on the words / which are Northern’),¹¹⁸ his partially ironic application of antiquated dialect forms to recall Bunting (‘Blood raged high / for clart pants’)¹¹⁹ or his use of region-specific terms in *Pearl* to legitimise his association with the terrain (‘up a height in the last wilderness on the frozen law’),¹²⁰ the poet’s urban vernacular is distinct in conveying a sense of being primarily configured around

¹¹³ *Horses*, p. 53.

¹¹⁴ *Demons*, p. 92. The poem contains an extensive version of this metaphor, and another exists in ‘Free Pet With Every Cage’: ‘the ultimate booking, the whipped out ticket, little Hitler / with spitfire pencil on permanent jack-up; when he’s not red / carding’ (*Demons*, p. 39).

¹¹⁵ ‘Barca No. 9’, Archive: BM: 2/10/3.

¹¹⁶ Archive: BM: 2/3.

¹¹⁷ Steve Spence: ‘MacSweeney’s great strength lies in the way he incorporates common speech into the artifice of the poem. The repetition is sometimes hilarious [...] Popular culture clashes with high art and the conflict is glorious’, ‘*False Lapwing*: Barry MacSweeney’, http://terriblework.co.uk/false_lapwing.htm [accessed 10 August 2007].

¹¹⁸ *Ranter*, p. 20.

¹¹⁹ Untitled poem, beginning ‘Blood raged high’, Archive: BM: 1/17/1.

¹²⁰ ‘*Pearl*’s Final Say-So’, *Demons*, p. 33.

his own natural lyric voice. This authenticity is due in part to moderation, as his ‘Geordie’ is rarely explicit, dense or resistant to broad interpretation, relying instead on the cyclical use of particular colloquial terms which transmit a sense of having transferred to the poetry from its author’s everyday speech: ‘A father should always respect his little bairns’.¹²¹ The fact that such expressions are frequently those of instinctual affection or hostility enhances their seeming legitimacy, from the childhood nostalgia implicit in ‘bairn’¹²² and ‘bonny’¹²³ to the distinctively onomatopoeic ‘hoy’¹²⁴ and the masculine bellicose ‘Pal’;¹²⁵ from the more generically northern ‘lass’¹²⁶ and ‘nowt’¹²⁷ to the determinedly Geordie ‘kidda’,¹²⁸ ‘scran’¹²⁹ and ‘Mackem’.¹³⁰ In his later poetry, and as his cityscapes matured, MacSweeney’s dialect usage also became increasingly Newcastle-specific, featuring terms such as ‘canny’ (‘my understated cannykin’),¹³¹ ‘Howay’ (‘howay honey I’ll take you doon the Bigg Market’, ‘Howay man pet’),¹³² ‘Hadaway’ (‘Hadaway Hadaway with you’),¹³³ and the archaic North Eastern ‘lonnen’ (‘Puny we / Lonnens ribbed against it’)¹³⁴ and ‘ploat’, (‘I ploated the stupid

¹²¹ ‘False Lapwing’, *False Lapwing*.

¹²² ‘before the bairns’ (‘Silent is the house’, *Memos*, p. 21), ‘Breasts are for kissing / & for bairns’ milk’, (‘Black Torch Sunrise’, *Wolf Tongue*, p. 76), ‘Delete the brightbairn’, (‘Himself Bright Starre Northern Within’, *Demons*, p. 80) and ‘fierce fall-down-the stairs bonny bairn’, (‘Lucifer’, *Postcards*).

¹²³ ‘the bonny / ribbons and pennants’, (Marker Buoy’, *Joint Effort*, p. 36), ‘funny birds and bonny’, (‘John Bunyan To Johnny Rotten’, *Demons*, p. 103), ‘my charcoal bonny love speaks flame’, (‘Lucifer’, *Postcards*).

¹²⁴ ‘hoy fury late chemist’, (‘Silent is the house’, *Memos*, p. 21), ‘the wind murmurs and hoys against my shins / and I am alone upon my little pins’, (‘Daddy Wants To Murder Me’, *Demons*, p. 44), ‘O yes / I hoy it back, defiant almost’, (‘Pearl Against The Barbed Wire’, *Demons*, p. 68).

¹²⁵ ‘Listen Pal / Compadre / Colleague / Friend’, (*Ranter*, p. 32), ‘Fuck me Pal / hve you seen his / Totally Wired / Face [...] Stick to the guidelines, Pal, / I’m the Govt’s friend’, (‘Wild Knitting’, *Tempers*, p. 268-269).

¹²⁶ ‘cannyllass’, (‘Don’t Leave Me’, *Wolf Tongue*, p. 297), ‘our lass / Just because you’ve lost your fella’, (‘Terrible changes’, *Horses*, p. 23).

¹²⁷ ‘whatte I know is nowt, sunny Jims’, (‘Colonel B’, *Tempers*, p. 209), ‘it is nowt’, (‘Don’t Leave Me’, *Wolf Tongue*, p. 299), ‘I’ve lost my new love. Nowt, blown away’, (‘Bare Feet In Marigolds’, *Wolf Tongue*, p. 231), ‘The bed’s a nowt now’, (‘Pearl Standing Alone In Sparty Moonlight’, *False Lapwing*), ‘But nowt has / I’m your crazed lover’, (‘Terrible changes’, *Horses*, p. 23).

¹²⁸ ‘Learn gristle kidda. Learn scumbag frown’ (‘Colonel B’, *Tempers*, p. 208).

¹²⁹ ‘one hand filled with bottles and the other with scran’, (‘Nil By Mouth: The Tongue Poem’, *Demons*, p. 56), ‘To scran the testament / you say’, (‘Sweet Advocate’, *Wolf Tongue*, p. 305).

¹³⁰ ‘even though you’re a Mackem supporter’, (‘The Heartbroken Starre’, *Horses*, p. 31), ‘O yes, let’s kick some Mackem Pharisee’ (Pasolini Demon Memo’, *Demons*, p. 54).

¹³¹ ‘Lucifer’, *Postcards*.

¹³² ‘Terrible Changes’, *Horses*, p. 23.

¹³³ ‘Lost Pity’, *Horses*, p. 32. A Geordie term meaning roughly ‘get away’ or ‘you’re kidding’, this use could also be taken as an allusion to the Tyneside playwright Tom Hadaway whose remarks on the relationship between dialect and identity are cited below.

¹³⁴ ‘for PBS one day early’, *Memos*, p. 10.

sky',¹³⁵ 'Cross me Mackem and I'll ploot you man'),¹³⁶ the former dated by Bill Griffiths back to 1581, the latter - with the meaning to 'hit' as MacSweeney employs it - to 1829.¹³⁷

That this dialect use frequently survived MacSweeney's rewrites (albeit in a carefully moderated capacity) where many other Newcastle designations did not is a fascinating trend and one cognisant of Tom Hadaway's belief regarding the preservation of class and locative identity: 'If our betters shame us out of our phrases and pronunciation, we shall be without resource. From a shared history, dialect is the enabling power of the commoner'.¹³⁸ Yet such expressions also subsist in MacSweeney's work as a part of his innate urban consciousness, appearing densely in manuscript poems with a specific Newcastle focus ('Now look at wu! Joe Plush / at every corner, velvet lies and / smarmy gobs [...] Crass it is an all / ahh can tell yi'),¹³⁹ and also in some published lyrics which retain 'raw sparks of an early draft, tight-knit, unembellished and vernacular' and where such 'regional adjectives' represent 'jewels in deceptively sparse works'.¹⁴⁰ For much of MacSweeney's career, his use of language denoting his birthplace operated around the twin principles of restraint and familiarity: the former enabling his disassociation from the often confining and somewhat denigrated realms of 'regional' verse,¹⁴¹ the latter ensuring that the terms he used were visibly denotative of Newcastle, thus precluding any need for their explicit deployment. This carefully measured implementation of geographical-linguistic associations (or the cultural link between 'canny' and 'Newcastle') allowed MacSweeney to blend disparate images in his work: to amalgamate

¹³⁵ 'Linda Manning is a Whore', Archive: BM 1/17/1.

¹³⁶ 'Walker Dan Two', Archive: BM: 1/120/1.

¹³⁷ *A Dictionary of North East Dialect*. Although the spelling of 'lonnen' which MacSweeney employs is more recent (Griffiths has its first use in the 1870s), the word meaning 'lane' may be traced back much further (p. 99). 'Ploot', originally meaning to 'pluck feathers' is recorded as meaning 'hit' in the 1820s. Griffiths gives this a more southern derivation ('urban Teesside') but MacSweeney's use suggests its currency within the whole of the North East (Griffiths, p. 123).

¹³⁸ Anon, 'Tom Hadaway', www.online.northumbria.ac.uk/faculties/art/humanities/cns/m-hadaway.html. [accessed 18 May 2006]

¹³⁹ 'Geordieus Unbound', Archive: BM: 2/2.

¹⁴⁰ Nicholas Johnson: 'Barry MacSweeney: An Appreciation'.

¹⁴¹ And thus from the likes of Skipsey and Pickard, whose poetry is still regarded as region-specific.

Jewish and Geordie heritage in: ‘hoyed / in the ovens and the gas’,¹⁴² or to evoke his cultural perspective in a poem otherwise unconnected to Newcastle with the application of a single word: ‘I ate grass upon the little lane and the lonnens with John / from the asylum’.¹⁴³ That MacSweeney’s use of this practice retained its reticence denotes his awareness of its frequent misappropriation, but it also exemplifies his concern with avoiding, wherever possible, both the typecasting of himself as a ‘regional’ poet, and the reinforcement of the city’s stereotypes, which the practice of versifying his native dialect inevitably evoked.

In her poem ‘Naming’, Litherland refers to MacSweeney as a ‘hater of *italics*’,¹⁴⁴ yet the poet’s occasional recourse to this style in his work (‘when the word *failure* fled into my dictionary’) suggests that the antipathy she implies is specific, and most likely refers to the italicisation of poeticised dialect.¹⁴⁵ MacSweeney’s resolution not to distinguish between his own – or other local voices – and ‘normal’ poetic speech in his work, to the extent that he often elided quotation marks from his constructions: ‘a discerning passer-by: leave him he’s pissed’, is evidence of his wish to avoid this type of social segregation.¹⁴⁶ It also distinguishes him from sometime Newcastle denizens Harrison and Pickard who make use of sloping text not just to identify the spoken voices in their work, but also to expressly accentuate working-class dialects. In Harrison’s poetry italics signal difference, voice his parents, other blue-collar characters, his adolescent self and counterpoint his mature, educated ‘roman’ designated accent: ‘*You’re like book ends, the pair of you*, she’d say’,¹⁴⁷ whilst Pickard uses them to expose the artificial appropriation of colloquial speech: ‘called everybody *marra*’¹⁴⁸

¹⁴² ‘John Bunyan To Johnny Rotten’, *Demons*, p. 103.

¹⁴³ ‘Barry’s Poem of Pain and Pleasure’, Archive: BM 1/19/1. A primarily London centric poem which cites the district of ‘Epping’ and refers to that city with ‘she was back in big town. My big town girl’ to which the poet brings a North East aspect, not through the use of place names but with ‘heifer’ and ‘lennen’.

¹⁴⁴ *The Work of the Wind*, p. 28

¹⁴⁵ ‘Daddy Wants to Murder Me’, *Demons*, p. 44.

¹⁴⁶ ‘Up A Height And Raining’, *Demons*, p. 94.

¹⁴⁷ ‘Book Ends’, *Selected Poems*, p. 126. Harrison has said about these voices: “‘It seemed as if the *italic* could somehow take over from the *roman* – I mean a pun on *roman*, since what I designate in roman type is me as the poet – so in the end I could become a mouthpiece. In the end, that is to say, there could be poems which are all italic”’ (Neil Roberts, ‘Poetic Subjects: Tony Harrison and Peter Reading’, p. 54).

¹⁴⁸ ‘The Devil’s Destroying Angel Exploded’, *Tiepin Eros*, p. 60.

and to separate his own, and the voices of his juvenile friends, from his adult narrative: ‘A hush round the lamp post [...] *Hoo, here’s Marta, look!*’.¹⁴⁹ Yet, in a manner redolent of his wider attitude to the city, MacSweeney eschews such divisiveness in order to express his native perspective without rendering it exclusive or inaccessible. His occupation of this middle ground distances him from these poets intent on dialectical dislocation, and from this eloquent, yet no less ‘local’ viewpoint, he is able to record the un-romanticised dramas of the city’s everyday existence, inscribe his organic relation to Newcastle through his collusive part in local ritual, and satirise outsider preconceptions by mobilising for his own parodist ends some of the stereotypes commonly used against his city:

Yob fights yob yes They call it Newcastle city centre

Yet some of us are almost literate and we go from bar to bar

And poetry comes to us and believe it or not we write it down.¹⁵⁰

That the urban characters who populate MacSweeney’s literary Newcastle are often less attractively portrayed than many of the locations they frequent, discloses the poet’s affection for his city and contemporaneous awareness of the fallibilities of its populace. Yet even in his earliest poems certain social sympathies and class distinctions are extant, and throughout his work he continued to differentiate between the lower class, morally dubious but ultimately worthy protagonists with whom he felt an innately empathetic connection and their white-collar equivalents. Individuals who despite the instances of working-class malady in his poetry (‘Houses roared and they hosed / them down. It was people getting out of rent arrears’),¹⁵¹ invite far more censure for their bureaucratic drudgery than is meted out to the broader plebeian population. For MacSweeney both local and personal issues impelled this peculiarly provincial, anti-authoritarian stance: one borne from centuries of political exclusion

¹⁴⁹ ‘Dancing Under Fire’, *ibid.*, p. 88.

¹⁵⁰ ‘The Illegal 2CV’, *Horses*, p. 42.

¹⁵¹ ‘Mary Bell Sonnets’ [39]. Archive: BM: 2/9/1.

and articulated in Paul Summers' 'Class Act' ('& attended all doctors & lawyers / with an unequivocal hatred')¹⁵² but intensified in MacSweeney's writing by his maltreatment by authority figures and abhorrence for abusers of power: 'bureaucrats and laughtercrats / and buggerycrats and civil service creeps'.¹⁵³ From the 'tinker' in 'On the Burning Down of the Salvation Army Men's Palace, Dogs Bank, Newcastle' who is defined by his trade: 'his spanner, scissors and knife-grinder, / which lay under 30 tons of debris'¹⁵⁴ and is the antithesis of 'Colonel B's incorporeal civil servants: 'cardboard heads / of grey overcoats / with writs to serve',¹⁵⁵ to the *Horses* poems where this same duality exists between the 'Geordie boys' who 'fight against other airmen',¹⁵⁶ and the 'stupid Quayside accountants who wipe the sweat with crass ties',¹⁵⁷ his fiercest bile is reserved almost without exception for Newcastle's administrative class. The corrupt, the materialistic and the robotic, whose actions have threatened the lives and liberties of working-class Geordies throughout history are thus pilloried in his work, from the 'ecclesiastical capitalists' who manipulated the early evolution of the city,¹⁵⁸ to the colliery owners who persecuted local miners¹⁵⁹ and the planners and politicians of his own generation whom he delightfully terms 'these plush arsed bastards'.¹⁶⁰

As such dissident pronouncements suggest, MacSweeney's often desolate, hostile and pathetic, yet resiliently droll and ultimately compassionate working-class protagonists are motivated by more than a poetic fascination with human depravity or Baudelaire's conviction that 'Courtisanes / Et bandits, tels souvent vous offrez des plaisirs / Que ne comprennent pas

¹⁵² *The Last Bus* p. 20.

¹⁵³ 'Geordieus Unbound': Archive: BM: 2/2.

¹⁵⁴ *The Boy*, p. 32.

¹⁵⁵ *Tempers*, p. 208.

¹⁵⁶ 'The Illegal 2CV', *Horses*, p. 42.

¹⁵⁷ 'The Garden Door is Open On The World', *Horses*, p. 44.

¹⁵⁸ In *Black Torch* MacSweeney uses the phrase 'ecclesiastical capitalism' to refer to the religious forces which impacted on the historical formation of the city and its region. (Archive: BM: 1/14/8).

¹⁵⁹ 'miners on strike during the war / spat on by Tommies / for refusing to man / pits 20 hours a day' ('William Gordon Calvert', Archive: BM: 2/3).

¹⁶⁰ 'Geordieus', Archive: BM: 2/2

les vulgaires profanes', in constituting expressions of his intrinsic working-class solidarity.¹⁶¹ Yet the situation here is complex, for though MacSweeney shares this crucial sense of his blue-collar heritage with Harrison, Pickard and others, his depiction of the Geordie populace shows neither the former poet's guilty sense of division and escape from the stratum, nor the latter's tendency to purposely amplify his allegiance and court shock by over-emphasising the brutal nature of his plebeian characters. Where Harrison professes to 'bolt from my study and go hide'¹⁶² when faced with the vocational rift involved in confronting labourers, MacSweeney views 'a programme [...] about offshore rigs' and avows a deep kinship devoid of irony or self-doubt: 'They're Geordies I know from Walker and Wallsend and Denton Burn / Deeply depressed men [...] But I love these men because they're real / workers like me.'¹⁶³ Often rough-edged, un-romanticised and wretched ('Walker Dan [...] all the bright excitements ever in my life / from a 7 o'clock in the morning German lager can'), MacSweeney's urban protagonists still retain a sympathetic bearing significantly lacking in Pickard's malevolent Geordies: 'sharrap oral kick ya teeth in'.¹⁶⁴ Whilst even the poet's female denizens, hampered as they are by functioning as male-appropriated motifs, are occasionally used to imply the uniqueness of the sexual lives which underlie the city's potent caricature: 'Kelly [...] will walk through the streets of Newcastle / with everything hanging off you like antlers.'¹⁶⁵ MacSweeney's characters, impelled by his inherent compassion, reach beyond the boundaries of traditional stereotype without needing to reject its essential truisms. So that even the most resonant Geordie cliché becomes in the work of this indubitable native an almost legitimate device, and one which his collusiveness allows him to employ without

¹⁶¹ 'Harlots and felons, you often hold out pleasures such as the worldly crowd cannot understand', Johnston, *The Poet and the City*, p. 151.

¹⁶² Tony Harrison; 'Rubbish', *Laureate's Block* p. 64.

¹⁶³ 'Klute', Archive: BM: 1/19/2. *Demons* drafts. These lines are followed by an even greater avowal of shared destiny: 'I'm burning and drowning with them'. Although arguably connected to these poets' respective native /non-native relation to the city, the incredible absence of irony or doubt in MacSweeney's correlation between his own profession as journalist-poet and that of a North Sea oil rig worker, when contrasted with Harrison's mild but instinctive shame, is irrefutable proof of the absolute seriousness with which he approached his vocation.

¹⁶⁴ 'Gang Shag'; *Tiepin Eros*, p. 54.

¹⁶⁵ 'The Dollbird/Redblonde', *Horses*, p. 64.

the usual accompanying irony or denigration: ‘They may wear their carmine lips / and thick-soled Bigg Market Saturday night sandals’.¹⁶⁶

MacSweeney’s genuine complicity with, and ability to respond to his environment is what dissociates his poetic from that of Harrison and Pickard. So that despite some degree of generation and class driven cohesion in their character choices (MacSweeney’s early ‘drunk & old / woman on the last bus West bangs her synthetic sealskin / boots against the seat sides & sings songs of the 1920s’¹⁶⁷ recalls Pickard’s ‘woman in her forties [...] well stewed. “Av never felt more like singing the blues [...] I get me bus here come with is”’), MacSweeney’s work has more in common with that of Bob Cooper, notable amongst North East poets for the individual acumen of his characterisations.¹⁶⁸ As John Sears observes, MacSweeney writes ‘from the perspective of one who identifies, perhaps too intensely for comfort, with all kinds of deprivations and seeks, through some uncertain but surely genuine redemptive aesthetic to save them all’.¹⁶⁹ This broad societal consciousness and a Baudelairean tendency to pinpoint and identify with the socially bereft is particularly evident in his affiliation with the addicted and insane as epitomised in the figure of ‘Tom’, a fellow clinic inhabitant (alter ego?) whom he invokes in *Demons*: ‘TOM YOUR MIND’S LIKE MINE: PEASE PUDDING. / We’re Navvies Tom, straight up’.¹⁷⁰ The poet’s awareness of interconnected lives and of the city’s organic social function also impels him to berate those who abuse their civic responsibility.¹⁷¹

¹⁶⁶ ‘In Pueblo Colorado’, Archive: BM: 2/7.

¹⁶⁷ ‘Death go Get Yr Shoes Repaired & Mend Yr Icey Hat’, *The Boy*, p. 51.

¹⁶⁸ *Guttersnipe* (San Francisco: City Lights, 1971), pp. 27-29.

¹⁶⁹ ‘Out of Control’.

¹⁷⁰ ‘John Bunyan to Johnny Rotten’, Archive: BM: 1/19/2. Johnston notes how in Baudelaire’s ‘Les Vin des chiffonniers’: ‘the passing comparison between rag picker and poet suggests their special relationship as outcasts and intoxicated dreamers, barred from whatever benefits (justice, for example) the orthodox human community might have to offer. Baudelaire’s sympathetic understanding of the lower-class poor is in significant contrast to Wordsworth’s pained reaction’ (*The Poet and the City*, p. 138).

¹⁷¹ MacSweeney’s shows significant frustration with anyone apparently freeloading the municipal system and thus debasing it for others, both those who turn to crime as an easy alternative to proper employment, those who avoid social responsibility altogether such as the much derided Durham students in ‘Good Times Gone Truly Bad’: ‘past the roundabout pansies / knocked over by pissed male and female failed Oxbridge fannies 3-in-a-row / across our pavements’ (Archive: BM 1/19/2) and those who manipulate the system from on high.

So that the anger directed towards the life-wrecking joyriders in *Memos* and the politicians in ‘Good Times Gone Truly Bad’ is of a truly personal nature:

Get home, fat boys, forget the miners, in your paid for cars

remember the bloated sheep

[...]

the collieries you never protected.¹⁷²

In many respects MacSweeney is an improbable champion for a community from whom he physically retreats and to whom his vocation is alien, something he openly admits: ‘he truly is a poet – smarted with genius, a total gem: only the proles don’t know it’.¹⁷³ Yet he was also capable of self-integration, and although no cap-wringing spokesman for the underclass, the poet’s passion for his city compelled his concern in its affairs, and ensured that he felt little sense of impropriety inscribing himself within the ranks of the Geordie working-class’.¹⁷⁴

A Personal City: Making it His Own

In addition to his mature self-appointment as a defender of the Geordie masses, MacSweeney also laid claim to his literary Newcastle by peopling it with his personal icons: the naming of factual individuals, such as the Animals frontman Eric Burdon (‘Eric Burdon / and Johnny Cash / say so’,¹⁷⁵ ‘Eric Burdon says so [...] Fuck off / get!’) acting as a symbolic portal to his adolescence as well as conjuring an irrefutably ‘Geordie’ frame of reference.¹⁷⁶ Yet it is the

¹⁷² Archive: BM: 1/19/2.

¹⁷³ ‘Mary Bell Sonnets’ [106] ‘The Lost Footballer’, Archive: BM: 2/9/1

¹⁷⁴ Writing of ‘Wild Knitting’, John Wilkinson notes MacSweeney’s ability to suddenly represent following an extended period of self-dislocation: ‘By a strange twist, the lone wolf is turned teacher and an example for social living; for after all the wolf is a social animal’ (‘A Single Striking Soviet’, p. 95).

¹⁷⁵ ‘Flame Ode’, *Odes 1971-78*, p. 38.

¹⁷⁶ ‘Circumference of Flame’, Archive. BM: 1/4/3. In the same way that the Beatles became, through the contrivances of the media, completely synonymous with the city of Liverpool, it is almost impossible to find any written information on their fellow ‘British Invasion’ band Eric Burdon and The Animals which does not mention their blue-collar origins in Newcastle: ‘The Animals were part of the English blues scene of the early Sixties and one of the most noteworthy bands of the original British Invasion. Formed in Newcastle-on-Tyne, a port city and coal-mining hub in northeast England, the Animals reflected their earthy upbringing with blues-

incongruous figures who MacSweeney places amidst his familiar Newcastle topographies that truly stamp his character on the city: from Johnny Cash at Eldon Square ('Tyneside black swagger strides [...] both just white trash, / under the hardest possible / frank and harsh North East rainlash [...] Two tall once again upright men in black – / addicts alike'),¹⁷⁷ to standing 'three feet from Muddy Waters and Burdon / singing She's 14 Years Old [Chess]' at the Club a GoGo'.¹⁷⁸ This technique is also evident in his combination of the *Memos* protagonists 'Robert Johnson Anne Sexton' with 'the Gallowgate crossroads',¹⁷⁹ and in his placing of an American rock band in the west-end: 'Send me Denton Burn directions / Babes in Toyland say'.¹⁸⁰ Whilst other poets have used such dislocation to serve a satirical agenda, as in W.N. Herbert's 'The Entry of Don Quixote into Newcastle upon Tyne',¹⁸¹ MacSweeney's city aliens are predominantly devoid of the jarring, refracting dynamic on which such depictions hinge. For like the historical musical heroes who occupy the genuine city locations in Cooper's 'Blue Friday' ('Billie Holiday breathes / *Lover, Where Can You Be* / in the Crown Posada / where all the faces turn / and everyone / is hushed'),¹⁸² Cash, Johnson, Sexton et al inhabit MacSweeney's Newcastle as almost organic components, fused with the city through their equal stature in his cerebral consciousness with the structural facets of Newcastle itself. This emotional connection developed to such an extent that it became abhorrent for him to envisage them, or himself, existing happily amidst any other landscape:

What should I do when we recover

Move to Essex?

[...]

based rock and roll' (Anon, 'The Animals', <http://www.classicbands.com/animals.html> [accessed 18 September 2007]). It is a peculiarity of MacSweeney's work however, that although he favours Lindisfarne as a location he declines to make the connection between the place and the band of the same name, which other poets – including Andrew Waterhouse – chose to exploit (in 'Good News From Lindisfarne', 2nd, Norwich: The Rialto, 2002, pp. 18-19).

¹⁷⁷ 'Six o'clock', Archive: BM: 1/20/1.

¹⁷⁸ 'Pearl Standing Alone In Sparty Moonlight', *False Lapwing*.

¹⁷⁹ 'Silent is the house', *Memos*, p. 21.

¹⁸⁰ 'Land of Broken Hearts', Archive: BM: 1/19/1.

¹⁸¹ *The Big Bumper Book of Troy*, pp. 16-17.

¹⁸² 'Blue Friday', *All We Know Is All We See*, p. 52.

I would never survive!

Robert and Anne in Chingford

I just cannot imagine it

the Jesus Christ Almighty in Hanger Lane.¹⁸³

In much of MacSweeney's work the connections between himself and the city are also enhanced by further patterns of mutually operative signification between person(s) and place, where Newcastle as a symbol for his identity is counterpointed with the geographical spheres of others in order to evoke the emotional tensions of past and present relationships, familial concerns, matters of friendship, enmity and inspiration. In 'John Bunyan to Johnny Rotten' MacSweeney positions a romantic idea of his own regionality against a belittling signifier for his father's native London in order to avow their temperamental difference: 'he was a jellied-eel traitor / to my poetic revolutionary heart'.¹⁸⁴ He creates a diametric opposition between these two key sites which transforms his line: 'Zimmer-frame tower blocks / Gateshead and Lambeth / the same sickness / Frittered, frigged off' from a train journey or architectural/social comparison into a privately resonant unification of his parental spheres.¹⁸⁵ The specific emotional personification of place is also present in 'Daddy Wants To Murder Me' where MacSweeney uses the 'rain' motif to juxtapose his own district of Newcastle ('Denton Burn') with Irish locations signifying his paternal heritage ('Sligo', 'Strabane') and the site of the Durham institution he attended to discover his father's whereabouts ('Waddington Street').¹⁸⁶

In what is perhaps the paradigmatic instance of this technique, many poems in both *Demons* and *Horses* exploit the disparities between Newcastle and Durham to represent the poet's relationship with Litherland as refracted through their separate places of habitation,

¹⁸³ 'Pearl, Jac, Pearl, Jac', Archive: BM: 1/18/2

¹⁸⁴ *Demons*, p. 103.

¹⁸⁵ Archive: BM 1/14/4: Extended Version of *Ranter*.

¹⁸⁶ *Demons*, p. 45.

locations to which they are connected and must always inevitably return.¹⁸⁷ Here, Litherland's Durham becomes an almost ethereal sphere, inspiring some of MacSweeney's most beautiful descriptive poetry outside of Sparty Lea,¹⁸⁸ whilst his own Newcastle is infused with a 'darkness' indicative of her absence and his mental state.¹⁸⁹ In her city, events take on glorious significance when undertaken in sobriety ('we go to Rushworth and Storey and buy nectarines')¹⁹⁰ whilst his homeward journey signals a return to a distorted reality: 'flinging me back / into the drunkenworld, from the tipsy rim of impossible places'.¹⁹¹ During periods of shared existence the lovers are portrayed as swans inhabiting Elvet (originally 'Swan Island') the oldest recorded district of the city: 'And we have swum in the Elvet and mated forever for life',¹⁹² and yet the poet must always escape from that which constitutes an infringement of his native temperament 'Her instructions hammered the brightness of my Tyneside skies' and retreat to his natural sphere: 'She drove me from the stricken bowls of Durham to the end of my days'.¹⁹³

Through these various juxtapositions Newcastle operates in MacSweeney's work as an emotional-psychological core: a place which he fused with other valued locations to assert their importance ('We stand by the Tyne and Seine and Shannon and shiver and cry')¹⁹⁴ and

¹⁸⁷ The relationship dynamic is also represented by the arrivals/departures necessitated by the train journey that both divides and unites the pair: 'Endless moments on Platform Two at Durham Station soaked in mist' ('The Man who walks', *Horses*, p. 76).

¹⁸⁸ 'in the soon to be handsome dawn of a reckless / damp November, with the gunmetal heavens plated quite beautifully / in goldleaf of fallen nature already so readily ready for the rising / sap of a dearest darling spring when we will start again and the curtains / will not be drawn at dawn beneath the monumental viaduct of the / great engineer. The truly great span of the legs above the city'. ('Ode To Beauty Strength And Joy And In Memory Of The Demons', *Demons*, p. 38).

¹⁸⁹ 'My faithful voice in the darkness of Denton Burn' ('Victory Over Darkness & The Sunne', *Horses*, p. 28).

¹⁹⁰ 'The Man who walks', *Horses*, p. 76.

¹⁹¹ 'Don't Leave Me', *Wolf Tongue*, p. 299.

¹⁹² 'Love's Swan Song', *Horses*, p. 41. This swan motif is pursued both in *Demons* and *Horses* where it acts as a signifier for Durham, Litherland and also for the poet himself when residing in that place. Its predominance also derives from the association with Baudelaire's 'Le Cygne', considered by Johnston to be that poet's 'most elaborate and most successful effort to broaden his treatment of the city' and 'enlarge the central theme of a heritage lost or betrayed' (*The Poet and the City*, p. 146) and a poem which is 'full of [...] would-be escapees' and flights 'towards something remembered', *Six French Poets of the Nineteenth Century*, ed. by E.H & A.M Blackmore (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), xxii.

¹⁹³ 'I Love You But No', *Horses*, p. 57.

¹⁹⁴ 'Himself Bright Starre Northern Within', Archive: BM 1/19/5. MacSweeney's self-identification with Paris and France, both in the guise of Apollinaire ('O dear Napoleon you kissed the big flag and just like Thee / I am

employed as a paradigm against which to set those he disliked: 'I laugh at those trying to get to London'.¹⁹⁵ In many respects the city never ceased to perform its initial function of acting as 'a point of departure' through which to explore 'other cities in other countries [...] with a sense of displacement and a heady loss of identity'.¹⁹⁶ Yet as his poetry developed, both this 'loss' and his provincial frustration at being tied to the city were gradually tempered by the formation of bonds between Newcastle, Sparty Lea, Paris, New York, Donegal and other emotionally charged locations which constituted natural extensions of his sense of self and acted as lyrical foils for his native city. That MacSweeney regarded such connections as obvious, as well as being aware of their provocative potential, is clear from his allusion to the poet Paul Summers as 'a Tynesider who lives in a city which matches Paris'.¹⁹⁷ The intense emotional dynamic which twins these two particular metropolises in his later work denotes this passion: 'There's a mirror in the bathroom of the Hotel Armstrong / Which reminds me of Tyneside and Vickers / There's a mixed-up confusion between us',¹⁹⁸ 'like the organs / of St Nicholas and St. Mary's in the heart of the city / and like St. Denise in the outskirts of beloved Paris'.¹⁹⁹ MacSweeney's existence as a geographically sentient writer ensured that the myriad locations which interspersed his poetry commonly related to crucial stages in his biographical evolution. Yet it was Newcastle that remained the benchmark in relation to which all other places were conceived and assessed, and even 'Paris' in Barry MacSweeney's estimation was only 'the most beautiful city except Venice and Newcastle'.²⁰⁰

France and France is me' ('Troubled Are These Times', *Horses*, p. 13) and from a personal perspective suggests that the emotional connection he felt was analogous to that of his Irish heritage and Geordie identity.

¹⁹⁵ 'Land of Broken Hearts', Archive: BM: 1/19/1.

¹⁹⁶ Clive Bush, 'Parts in the Weal', pp. 306-19.

¹⁹⁷ MacSweeney, 'Foreword' to *The Last Bus*: 'This is a sustained collection, sometimes echoing the best of Modernist French poetry – not so odd for a Tynesider who lives in a city which matches Paris' (p. 7). The outlandish nature of this analogy for many whose attitudes to Newcastle still mirror that of the critic Brian Sewell who concluded that Tyneside audiences were not sophisticated enough to appreciate works of art, would have been a definite consideration for MacSweeney.

¹⁹⁸ 'Rue Christine Lundi', *Horses*, p. 74. The use of 'Armstrong' here automatically conjures Newcastle's industrial – and by proxy military – past even without the specific citation, whilst the poet in Paris is haunted by echoes of his native city: 'And the black and white cat is stalking the floor'.

¹⁹⁹ 'Victory Over Darkness & the Sunne', *Horses*, p. 29.

²⁰⁰ 'Klute', Archive: BM: 1/19/2.

Conclusion

One could sometimes be forgiven for believing that the fundamental and enduring landscapes of the rural and the urban North East in Barry MacSweeney's poetry, those which unite his work from the first to the last of his compositions and emerge as powerful motivic resources, particularly in times of emotional trauma, when 'words return, faithful in hard days; care, / without restraint', exist as distinct and autonomous spheres within his work:¹ that the poet's conception of them is founded on the 'nature-civilisation antithesis' which John H. Johnston observes in Virgil's *Georgics*, 'the classic prototype of the loco-descriptive poem'.² Indeed in many respects, MacSweeney did much to uphold this idea, depicting Sparty Lea and his wild Northumbrian vistas as the domain of glorious and unfettered nature and his Newcastle, and to a lesser extent Durham, as seats of debauchery and political corruption. In providing these spheres with distinct descriptive lexicons ('tumblestones' and 'maniac milk') and alternate symbolic statuses ('on the rug in the front room at two in the morning / I long for the long cry of all the wild birds I know');³ by allying them with dissimilar concepts of love and sexuality ('Bossbabes heading from Haymarket to Monument [...] but my love stakes higher ground')⁴ and using them to denote opposite aspects of his essential identity ('Sweeno is two people', 'gutter treasurer' and 'bridger of burns'),⁵ he continually inscribed a division. Yet although at times prone to using urban satire, his broad 'topographical' perspective frequently triumphed, enabling him to view the city 'within its total physical and temporal context', and as a part of his treasured region.⁶ Crucially then, these topographies are not individual, but intersecting realms in his consciousness, a sense which he expressed most effectively by means of natural

¹ 'Our Mutual Scarlet Boulevard' [14], *Boulevard*, p. 72.

² *The Poet and the City*, xvi-xvii.

³ 'My former Darling Country Wrong or Wrong', *Postcards*.

⁴ 'Six', *Horses*, p. 25.

⁵ 'Sweeno, Sweeno', *Demons*, p. 89.

⁶ *The Poet and the City*, xvii.

motifs, through the skies and clouds which traversed them, but most of all by taking a total, hydrological view of their ecosystems and waterways.

For MacSweeney, the River Tyne constituted the greatest such signifier, one essential not just for the part it had played in his city's foundation, growth and industrial prosperity, as an equally momentous index of its loss, or even as an emblem of nature's survival amidst the contrived and chartered social structure,⁷ but for its organic relation, by means of the tributary system, of two of his most fundamental spheres: Newcastle and Sparty Lea.⁸ This correlative realisation was of fairly late fruition in the poet's work and many of his earlier compositions grapple uncomfortably with the import and legacy of the river motif: as representative of the liaison between man and nature ('dragging a golden plate across / the sewage'),⁹ as a source of foreboding attraction ('rain and the train and / the river darkly summoning / towards its source my heart'),¹⁰ and, somewhat bizarrely, as the setting for an archaic idyll: 'women of Newburn splash themselves in the summer evening / Undressed almost like goddesses and the scullers' songs are wind on the water'.¹¹ In 'Map, etcetera', however, the poet intimates his conception of the river as a sentient witness, bearing the historical scars of human usage:

Ghosts

of keels and wherries

in the bend

at Blaydon swamp

no mist-trick

a clanking by the earthworks

sylvan haughs

gradual change

⁷ 'The chartering of the streets and river represents society's attempt to define its world, to bring under one law parts of the city and parts of nature, and to ensure uniformity' (Sharpe, *Unreal Cities*, pp. 2-3).

⁸ In that the East Allen River which acts as a major Sparty Lea signifier for MacSweeney runs into the River Allen, thus into the South Tyne, Tyne and then North Sea.

⁹ 'To Lynn at Work', *The Boy*, p. 2.

¹⁰ 'Hooray Demons Salute', *Demons*, p. 65.

¹¹ 'I Love You But No', *Horses*, p. 60.

to scattered yards

rust.¹²

In the archive poem ‘The wind is beautiful tonight, Jac’, the river becomes a force of nature whose progress is stilled by human detritus:

It roars from the Pennines, rushes down
past Hexham and Wylam and Blayney Row
into the tidal mark at Stella
where the river is still filth, flounders
fulled with clarts.¹³

Then, in the poem ‘Wylam Railway Bridge’ which opens with a nod to Malevich evoking a wish for clarity of form and new beginnings: ‘Here where the Tyne flows from the wonderful uphill / and you fling your arms out in your waxed jacket on our / Suprematist structure’, he seems to find the proper use for his River Tyne imagery. In the lines:

Heart kinship love and cherishment run away faster than the Tyne

It flows and flows away all the way from Haltwhistle to the tidal turn
[...]
Our pink salmon spawning beds lie under Wylam railway bridge
And our Tyne flows the hills and madly away

he sets the endurance of nature against the brevity of human emotion, and ‘bridges’ the rural and the urban in the image of this crucial waterway, whose East Allen origins in the Pennine hills, passage through Newcastle and into the North Sea by the offices of the *Shields Gazette*; whose multitudinous guises but singular nature connects his two key North East landscapes.¹⁴

¹² *Boulevard*, p. 24.

¹³ *Pearl* ‘Draft B’, Archive, BM: 1/18/2. ‘Stella’ here refers to Stella Bank, Blaydon.

¹⁴ *Horses*, p. 62.

I hope that the demarcated but still cumulative structure, and the unifying premises of this thesis have been able to honour and reflect the fluidity and interactivity of MacSweeney's North East landscapes, but I also hope that my study has contributed to a greater appreciation of their compass and profundity. Somewhat incongruously, the poet spent parts of his writing career playing down his region and regionality, and one only has to hear a recording of him read: examine his phonetically rendered 'notes to self' ('ME GRAN [on the '20's and polis? trouble]')¹⁵ or see a transcript of his vernacular style ('there's some 14 year old complete glue-sniffing nugget...and when they get caught its like 40 credibility points') to realise the extent to which he frequently tempered his own 'Geordieness' in his lyrics.¹⁶ MacSweeney's lifelong dedication to being a 'proper' poet effected many of the elisions, mitigations and moderations which to varying degrees contorted the representation of the North East in his published work, and conversely enabled it to thrive within his manuscripts and less vigorously revised poems. Yet his resolve not to become 'provincial' and his desire to be imagistically egalitarian in his writing, had positive effects on the durable nature of his poetic, enabling him to be both local and international; linguistically explorative but civically sentient in a manner which few poets were able by fusing the diverse locations in his work on the basis of personal emotion and private experience.

The compassion and detail which MacSweeney incorporated into his portrayals of Sparty Lea, Newcastle, Northumberland and the North East, without conceding his awareness, or the context of the wider world, may well contribute to an argument against the critical belief that in an increasingly homogenised modern world truly 'regional' poetry is all but obsolete.¹⁷ This thesis demonstrates the centrality of the landscapes which were crucial to this

¹⁵ Archive: BM: 2/2.

¹⁶ MacSweeney, interview broadcast on Radio Newcastle, transcribed by Paul Batchelor.

¹⁷ This refers to the theory that in a world increasingly dominated by social consumerism and linked by highly advanced communication and migration systems, there can no longer be any such concept as regionalism in modern literature. Notably such fears were voiced by Parkinson as early as 1972 when he stated that 'faced with Marshal McLuhan's Global village culture and an increasingly dominant national culture, partially created and sustained by the mass media, it is vitally important for writers, folk-singers, critics and researchers to sustain and energise our distinctive and differing regional cultures, both written and oral' ('Poetry in the North East', p.

linguistically reluctant but indigenously inveterate 'regional' writer, his willingness to respond to their evolving forms and his constant endeavours to inscribe and understand his own interaction with them through the metamorphosing forms of his poetry.

107). This situation has, of course now greatly advanced, and in his recent lecture on literary regionalism D.T. Taylor cited the opinion of *Guardian* journalist Ian Jack asserting that 'British society has become so homogenous that any writer at work anywhere would end up addressing more or less the same themes [...] the grit in the oyster of the creative imagination is the same grit, whether dredged up in Salford or Cheltenham', 'Writing from the Margins: the English Regional Novel from Sid Chaplin to Julia Darling, lecture, presented 28 June 2004, www.litandphil.org.co.uk/taylor/margins.html [accessed 28 May 2005]. Another argument 'against' employs the hypothesis that there can be no real 'regionalism' in poetry if all 'regional' poetry derives its compositional notions from other, previous provincial forms, which in themselves rely on a set structural amalgamation of local historical, cultural, dialect, mythological, named locational, flora, fauna and landscape feature motifs.

Appendix One: Source Materials and Methods of Citation

My use of primary sources requires some clarification in order to establish the relationships between MacSweeney's published, uncollected, draft and unpublished work, and to identify all other primary data from his notebooks, correspondence and miscellaneous manuscripts.

i. Published Work.

Within MacSweeney's published work several duplications occur, although the texts of the poems remain virtually unchanged. Poems published in *Our Mutual Scarlet Boulevard* (1971) previously appeared in *Joint Effort* (1970) and *The Last Bud* (1969) as well as in many small magazines. *Just 22 and I Don't Mind Dying* was published by Curiously Strong in 1971; Turpin Press in 1973 and collected in *Odes 1971-78* (1978); *The Tempers of Hazard* (1993) and in *Wolf Tongue* (2003). The poems grouped as 'Zero Hero' in *Etruscan Reader III* (1997) were published in the same year and in almost identical form as part of *The Book of Demons*. Nearly all of the published material cited in this thesis was selected, approved or compiled in accord with the wishes of the poet.¹ The posthumously collected *Horses* is termed by its publisher as the 'last [book] completed by Barry MacSweeney before his death in 2000', the veracity of which is upheld by the similitude between it and the archive mss. The poems 'False Lapwing' and 'Pearl Standing Alone in Sparty Moonlight' were published by Peter Riley in 2002 in accord with the poet's wishes. Riley states that these pieces were 'intended by Barry for the anthology *April Eye* [...] to replace the two printed by him therein' and had to be 'recovered from his papers' to rectify this error.² For the arrangement of *Wolf Tongue*, Bloodaxe followed the selection which MacSweeney made in 'May 1999' noting that 'the arrangement [...] is his' and explaining any additions in a detailed 'Note on the Text'. Equally they honoured his wishes as to what was not to be used: 'Barry also specified that this

¹ Back cover, *Horses*.

² Peter Riley, 'Notes' to *False Lapwing*.

selection should not include “any of the other 150 poems published in mss”, or any of the mostly unpublished “Mary Bell Sonnets”, and “no translations”.³

My citations from MacSweeney’s published work are taken wherever possible from the original or earliest collected publication of such: i.e. from Hutchinson’s 1968 publication of *The Boy From The Green Cabaret*, from *The Last Bud* (1969), *Joint Effort* (1970), *Flames on the Beach at Viareggio* (1970), *Our Mutual Scarlet Boulevard* (1971), *Brother Wolf* (1972), *Fools Gold* (1972), *Dance Steps* (1972), *Fog Eye* (1973), *Blackbird* (1980), *Ranter* (1985), *Hellhound Memos* (1993), *The Book of Demons* (1997), *Postcards From Hitler* (1998) ‘False Lapwing’ (2002) and *Horses in Boling Blood* (2004). For the poems previously published in *Just 22 and I Don’t Mind Dying*, (1971), *Five Odes* (1972) and *Six Odes* (1973) I took my citations from the identical texts of *Odes 1971-78* (1978). Being unable to acquire a published copy of *Black Torch* I took my references from the complete ‘mock up’ version in the archive [BM: 1/14/8], likewise for *Starry Messenger* (Secret Books, 1980 [BM: Box 23]). The texts for ‘Colonel B’ (1980), ‘Liz Hard’, Liz Hard II’, ‘Jury Vet’, ‘Wild Knitting’ and ‘Finnbar’s Lament’ were taken from 1993’s *The Tempers of Hazard*. My citations from *Pearl* and from the *Zero Hero* poems ‘Strap Down in Snowville’, ‘Sweeno, Sweeno’, ‘Up a Height and Raining’ and ‘Tom in the Market Square Outside Boots’ are taken from their publication in 1997 alongside *The Book of Demons* due to their thematic connection to this work.

In the instance of several late poems and where no earlier text for individual pieces was readily accessible, I have taken my references from *Wolf Tongue* (2003). These comprise: ‘Black Torch Sunrise’ (1977-78), ‘Far Cliff Babylon’ (1978), the uncollected poems ‘La Rage’, ‘Don’t Leave Me’, ‘When the Lights Went Out A Cheer Rose in the Air’, ‘Sweet Advocate’ (1999), ‘I Looked Down on a Child Today’, ‘Totem Banking’, ‘Here We Go’ and the poems from *Pearl in the Silver Morning* (1999): ‘Cushy Number’, ‘Bare Feet In

³ ‘Note on the Text’, *Wolf Tongue*, p. 10.

Marigolds', 'Daft Patter', 'Pearl In The Silver Morning' and 'We Are Not Stones'. In instances where MacSweeney's collections are not paginated, I have given the poem's title and its collection (as in *Postcards*) or, where numbers take the place of titles (as in the case of *Brother Wolf*), then the number of the poem in square brackets. Also, where a longer poem is divided into numbered sections (as in 'The Last Bud') I have given the number of the section in square brackets following the poem's title. Most of MacSweeney's published collections and some key critical works are abbreviated in the footnotes and text and a list is provided. I chose however, not to abridge *Wolf Tongue* or *Brother Wolf* in order to avoid any confusion arising between the two.

ii. Archive Material

My references to the MacSweeney Archives, that housed in the University's School of English which contains the poet's personal library including 'books, poetry pamphlets, poetry journals, music and photographs that Barry collected over his lifetime' and that located in the Robinson Library's Special Collections, take the following form.⁴ Those to the former are necessarily few, it being largely a secondary resource invaluable for exploring MacSweeney's passions but containing little primary information outside his published collections. Where I have cited such material I have made its derivation clear in my footnotes, and on occasions when I have cited the poet's annotations to the books held in his library, I have done likewise. Those to the latter are more complex in that this archive comprises all of MacSweeney's draft and published works, correspondence (the majority not legally admissible), literature reviews, poetry publications and 'examples of his journalism, including articles written for provincial newspapers throughout the 1970's',⁵ his private paperwork from AA meetings and detox clinics as well as other personal memoranda: all of which is collated into numbered box files,

⁴ <http://www.ncl.ac.uk/elll/research/literature/macswweeney/>

⁵ Ibid.

beginning with his published mss., progressing to the unpublished and then to other materials. The nature of my research necessitated my making the greatest use of materials catalogued in sections I and II of this Archive. Section I is mostly loose leaf but there are also some bound collections of material classed as ‘published’, including both final and draft versions of work published by MacSweeney through small and large presses and in pamphlet form during his career. Section II is classed as ‘unpublished’ and contains predominantly material pertaining to both individual poems, and to sequences which remained unpublished at the time of the poet’s death, with the exception of *Horses in Boling Blood*. The late and final drafts of which reside in Section I, with some earlier versions, often grouped under different headings, in Section II.

The material on which I have most relied on from Section II comprises ‘Toad Church’ (1972); ‘Geordieus Unbound’ from the mid 1970s; the eight poem sequence ‘Black Spur’ which bears passing linguistic relation to the much shorter published poem ‘Ode Black Spur’; numerous ‘uncollected’ and largely unedited narrative fragments, many of which date from the mid-late 1990s;⁶ some proposed ‘Pearl’ poems which did not make the poet’s final selection; material headed ‘Dark Entries’ (1997) which is preparatory work for his Apollinaire translations and his mostly unpublished sequence ‘Blood Money: The Marvellous Secret Sonnets of Mary Bell Child Killer’ which he left instructions was not to be included in *Wolf Tongue*, an incidence which inevitably complicates its critical appraisal.

In order to identify the derivation of such material within my text I have retained the archive’s numeric system, so that any source referred to as ‘Archive: BM: 1/...’ pertains to MacSweeney’s published and ‘uncollected’ work and will be identified as such, and any as ‘Archive: BM: 2/...’ refers to his unpublished material including poems relating to, but which were not included in his published sequences. Where the poems were undated and I deemed

⁶ MacSweeney stated in an interview for Radio Newcastle that after finishing *Demons*, he had ‘about 200 poems that I’ve written in the last six months’, in addition to ‘working on a series of translations from the French of the poems of Guillaume Apollinaire’.

it relevant or useful, I have included in the footnotes, in parentheses, an indication of the era of MacSweeney's career to which a manuscript source pertains (i.e. circa *Demons*). I have also striven to identify where a citation derives not from a type or handwritten version of a poem, but from a type or handwritten note or amendment to that poem, both in order to clarify my use of the sources and to convey a sense of MacSweeney's creative process apropos the definition (and obscuration) of his North East landscapes. The varying comprehensibility of MacSweeney's handwritten texts is a consideration, and I have only cited words and lines of which I was confidently assured. Any mistakes in the interpretation are mine. MacSweeney's own strikethroughs within his hand written and type written texts are replicated in kind.

Appendix Two: 'The Autobiography of Barry MacSweeney'

'Born in "The Village", Benwell, Newcastle On Tyne, July 1948. Educated Rutherford Grammar School, best subjects art & English. About 1963 picked up in France a copy of Rimbaud's *Illuminations* and *The Drunken Boat*. Then Baudelaire, Laforgue. Wrote first poems at school. That was a cissy thing to do of course. Began job as reporter on local evening paper. Met Basil Bunting, poet. Met Tom Pickard and Jon Silkin. Showed Bunting *Walk* poem, it came back sliced down to about 4 lines and a note: Start again from there. My first real lesson. Reporting gave me a sense of what words could be: economy and just get down the *needed* things, with no frills. Open to the city and the country. You can walk out of Newcastle for half an hour and be in greenery. The city gave words a harshness, like the steel or coal. Then I wd flit off to a little stone cottage on the fells and fish for trout, and pick mushrooms. & swim in the freshwater lakes. Began to translate Laforgue, Cros, Corbiere.

1966-67: newspaper packed me off to Harlow Technical College, Essex, on a full-time journalist diploma course. An opposite life altogether. Synthetic new town, a dormitory to London. Its population, commuters with a vengeance. And the land was flat, that was a shock. An utter antithesis to Newcastle. Everything was so clean and clear-cut, and the people, they didn't *belong*, and had no roots in the town. Oasis. It was impossible to get involved. My eye, my colour/slucce became arbitrary for the first time. It was merely a funnel, and events and actions got a natural response from me. In Newcastle I was always too involved, always leaving pieces of myself against the walls. I wrote *The Boy From The Green Cabaret* poems in Harlow, and some political things for the first time. It was here I really woke up. Poems were fast and often, but it was bitter and solitary too. Spent days looking for some natural spot in the whole synthesis: found it, a small duck pond with sluice and lily-pads and foot-bridge. Told later it was one of the town planner's landscaping tricks.

Left here July 1967, *sans honneur*, carrying a bad character report in my hand & some poems, returned home to get the sack. But they didn't like the cut of my face either. Since then jobs as

chief reporter in Cumberland, dole, reporter, social security, dole, gardener, dole. Now helps run Morden Tower poetry readings, and publishing posters and books. & of course writing poems. Wants to see poets get away from revisionism. Nobody returns in glory to Lucknow. and this is June 1968, Newcastle.'

Source: *The Boy From The Green Cabaret Tells of His Mother* (London: Hutchinson, 1968).

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